Title Picture

The Twisted Tale of Windvale

Dedication Page

To my friends - without you, I wouldn't have had a story inspiration!

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I REALLY WANT THIS TO BECOME A MOVIE
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Chapter One

Chapter One - Jayman

This isn't a chapter.

There! I admitted it. Consider this to be more of an...introduction. You see, this is a very crazy story and before you even think about skipping this and just moving on, there is some stuff you need to know first. You need to know about Windvale itself!

I know a lot of people hate world lore before the story begins, but this is very vital information here, baby. Windvale is one zany area.

And don't worry! This isn't a cliche poor slummy town! This place is actually very popular. At least...it is now. Yes, you can let out your sighs. At first, it was a cliche poor slummy town. And guess what? I LIVED THERE! Once you hear about my house and my job, you will start appreciating your life more. Because mine was terrible.

My job barely made a cent a day! I worked at their only diner: Granny Urchin's Pub n' Club. This place is known for two reasons:

1. Their BLT sandwich is pretty dang decent.
2. There isn't a second reason. No one knows what it is.

You wanna know something even worse than my job? MY HOUSE! In Windvale, there are a total of five houses. I only lived by one other house, which thankfully hasn't had an owner in 137 years. My house was tiny. The walls were red, and the roof was green. Merry Christmas, everybody! There was a whopping amount of two rooms in that house!

There was a kitchen. Literally nothing special there. And there was also a bedroom. That was also forgettable, but there was one part of it that made me want to yak when I first saw it. Every single last piece of that crooked, small bed was PINK. And not just any pink...HOT PINK. It's like a Barbie house but in reality.

The outfit I wore for Granny Urchin's was the dinkiest outfit I ever wore. A pale green polo shirt, jean shorts, and a teal visor with an urchin on it. I looked like I was volunteering as a lifeguard for a beach. This, my friend, was a diner.

Now you're probably wondering who I am and what my story is. Well, my name is Jayman Hampton. And no, this isn't The Outsiders. My name is pronounced JayMIN. Oh yeah! I forgot to mention the giant name tags they make you wear at Granny Urchin's that just says JAYMAN in all caps. People have been making theories that I'm undercover as a superhero named Jay Man. Who is weird enough to make a superhero after a blue jay?

This is my appearance: Black hair, blue eyes, Greek hook nose. Your average MMC, but with a much more refined personality! You will never catch me calling my partner "Darling" or

“Princess”. Also, name another MMC that works at the best diner ever! (Hopefully the people understand this is a joke. Granny Urchin’s is the worst. It smells like feet in there.)

Now, you might be wondering what this book is actually about. If you didn’t read the back…

It’s a book about eyes.

I’m not even kidding. The entire plot is just eyes galore.

Now I know you’re thinking: “Why eyes?” Well, you see, in Windvale, there has always been this thing where if you were born with auburn eyes (if you don’t know what auburn is, it’s basically a really strange shade of brown.), you were mentally insane and was driven to kill.

How does this connect with the plot, you might ask? I have a best friend named Rulio Scherer (you’ll meet him later), and he was born with auburn eyes. He’s always worn sunglasses to school, so no one knows about his eye color but me. If they did find out, that would not end well.

Before you flip the page to the next chapter, I should warn you that this book can cause emotional tears because for some reason, I know someone that literally cries at every movie he watches, speaking as the author. I’m not even kidding. He cried watching The Devil Wears Prada.

Back to Jayman speaking. In a short summary, Windvale is this wasteland that I somehow ended up living in, and Rulio has these eyes that people think cause cancer. This is swell so far!

Now, you may actually read. Enjoy! (I’m not really expecting you to.)

Chapter Two

Chapter Two - Jayman

Time to get this show on the road!

In Windvale, there is only one room that we just decided is a school. They named it "Windvale Learning". It's stupid. After all, it's 1971! Not 1871! But anyway, my best friend Rulio and I were in junior year of college, so we were on the older side by far. But there was still one grade ahead of us: The *seniors* in college. They were always the ones causing the mischief at WL. And they don't apologize. Ever.

So you can imagine coming back to school after winter break was a disaster for us. And I'm gonna get straight to the point: IT WAS.

I picked up Rulio from his house, which was actually a shack. Rulio used to enjoy stealing furniture and other essential living-in-a-house stuff that he needed. Now it genuinely looks like a makeshift house.

The shack had white paint dripping off on the sides, and it had a log roof. The door was crooked, with the bottom left corner chopped off from a thunderstorm. I knocked on his door. "Rulio! It's Jayman! We're going to school again!"

You see, Rulio is a very insecure guy. And not just about his eyes. He always thinks his hair looks bad, he thinks his body is not in the right shape, and he always thinks his cheekbones look too chubby. Personally, I don't think any part of his body looks bad. He's just been bullied a whole lot in his life.

Rulio slightly cracked the door open to check if it was actually me and not some senior about to throw a smoke bomb. He walked out, and he looked nervous. Rulio has golden middle parted hair, obvious auburn eyes, and a scar on his neck.

I smiled at him. "Hey, buddy! It's time for our annual walking to school together thing that I don't know what to call and now I keep talking about why do I keep doing this." He slightly smiled. "It's been...fine. I guess. Just some alone time for a few weeks." I nodded. "That sounds like the perfect winter to me."

Rulio looked around nervously, and then back at me. "I'm worried that something is gonna happen to me." I clapped my hand onto his shoulder. "Don't fret. I will stand up to the bullies." He looked behind at the shack as if something really important was still in there, and he needed it before he went to hell.

But we were gonna be the tardiest students there if we didn't hurry up. And we don't want detention. I grabbed Rulio's arm. "Come on." But he kept looking. And I could see through his shades. There was sadness in his eyes. Something in there meant a lot to him. I already knew it.

We started walking. I looked back at Rulio. “Are you okay? Do you need something?” That second question startled him. His eyes widened, and his mouth slightly opened. He bit his bottom lip. “No. I don’t need anything.”

Okay, listen up, folks. I have been working at Granny Urchin’s for longer than I need to. One thing I have learned from there is *people lying*. Fun fact! A year or two ago, there was one incident where I asked the customer a simple question: What do you want to eat? For some strange and unknown reason, that caught the customer off guard. The guy was obviously not ready to eat, so I asked: Or do you need a minute? Another normal question! But the guy bit his bottom lip and just said, “No. I don’t need a minute.”

Basically the exact thing Rulio did a second ago. Rulio was lying.

In case you’re wondering, the customer ordered a bean burrito. Granny Urchin’s did not smell good for the rest of the day.

So I could tell Rulio was unhappy about something. I was about to tell him that I knew he was lying and we would gladly go back, but then a senior came up to us. And it wasn’t a nice one, either. Kurt Churchwill.

Kurt was much taller than me and Rulio. And by that, I mean *towering.* His hair was never nicely done and it was the greenest shade of dye I have ever seen. (I have only seen one.) He had the brownest eyes that I swear were poop. Kurt always had sweat dripping down his face, even though it was the middle of winter.

He looked down at us. “Hey, juniors. Do you wanna level up to Expo Level for the subjects that way you don’t have to review prime numbers and algebra? Oops! Forgot to mention: That’s only for *seniors.*”

I burst out laughing. Sorry, Rulio, but I could *not* hold that in. Just the way he pronounced seniors as if they were the leaders…that was just absolute cinematic comedy right there. Also, who freaking cares about Expo Level? Did he think we were nerds? I just wanna graduate and get out of Windvale Learning.

Rulio looked at me nervously, and I put a finger to my lips and whispered, “Let me do the talking.” He nodded. I walked up to Kurt. The senior put a toothpick in his mouth. “What? You think your tiny posture will knock me down?”

Kurt grabbed my arm and slammed me against the concrete. Thankfully, I landed on my back, so nothing serious got hurt. The senior smirked, toothpick sticking out the corner of his mouth. “Let’s reverse that, but add in the fact that I’m a giant.”

In case anyone’s wondering, I’m standing strong at 5’ 10”. Kurt, on the other hand, is at least a 7 footer. That may not seem like much coming from words on a page, but that is a huge height difference in real life.

The last thing I wanted was for more seniors to join him. You see, Kurt is the leader of a gang called the Junkets. (In case you're wondering, the word junket means a trip solely meant for pleasure. That's what Kurt thinks he is.) And the amount of Junkets there are at Windvale Learning is insane. (You're probably wondering how there are so many students but only five houses. That's because the surrounding richer areas don't have a school, so everyone just comes here. Woo freaking hoo.)

Right before Kurt could land another punch, I do something that no junior has ever dared to do in front of a Junket: just walk away. Seriously. I bobbed my arms back and forth, moved my feet to the door, and boom! I was already there. And something else to add: While I was walking, Kurt didn't even *bother* fighting me. He just stood there, genuinely shocked. And you wanna know something else thrilling? There was genuine sweat rolling down his forehead. That's right. Yuh-huh. You better believe it, baby. Kurt Churchwill was *scared* of me. Scared that I would just ignore him. Because believe me, *no one* ignores Kurt. He doesn't want to be ignored. He wants to stand out with his stupid toothpick sliding around his mouth, and he wants to be the first thing everyone sees when they go to school.

It's strange, really.

Kurt turned to a Junket and whispered something to him. Then Kurt finally realized that he was acting like a baby, so he put on his vintage face. Eyes dark, nose flared, green hair spraying everywhere, toothpick that looks sharper than it did a second ago, a smirk eating his entire face, and best of all: That blazing sweat, baby.

He put his meaty hands into his pockets and walked up, the other Junket slowly trailing behind. Kurt scoffed when he reached me. "Junior, stop breaking the rules. I'm only saying this once: No one ignores me. So, you've got two options." I sighed. "And what are they, knuckles?"

The senior was taken back by my nickname for him. No one has ever given Kurt Churchwill a nickname. And certainly not an offensive one, either. That's a win for Jayman! Kurt grunted and crossed his burly arms. "One option is to continue walking away and enjoying your life. But that means you will be number one on my watchlist and I will always be coming for you. Another option is to not ignore me, continue fighting, and this feud can be over once I have beaten you."

I shrugged. "I don't know. That is a tough decision right there. Let me think about it, okay?"

The senior looked back down at me and put his toothpick in between his index and middle finger. "Listen. We don't take time here, Junior. So speed it up, would ya?" I smiled. "All right! I have come to a decision." Kurt tsked. "Let's see what this guy has to say."

I have such a good white lie in mind. Time to spill it out:

"Kurt Churchwill, you are surely someone that enjoys bullying every junior you see. And I acknowledge that I am also a junior. But next year, I will be a senior. And you would have graduated and are now living in your luxurious home in one of the surrounding cities. As the leader of the Junkets, you have been handing black eyes to juniors like candy this year. Not a day passes by without one. And I have a deal for you, Kurtis-" (That's his full name. It takes full bravery to call him that. You should've seen THE LOOK ON HIS FACE HAHAHAHAHA okay I will stop now and continue with my speech.) "-you can come and beat me up all you want for the rest of the day. But, but, but...there will be no more fights between you or anyone else. You got that clear?"

Kurt stood there with full puzzlement. His green hair was back to normal, the toothpick had fallen on the ground, the brown eyes looked poopier than ever, and the sweat had stopped. This was not Kurt the Junket. This was Kurtis Norman Churchwill right here. (Please don't ask how I know his middle name.) But then he realized *again,* so his mood shifted *again.* He scoffed. "Why did I even bother with you? You're a freaking philosopher!"

Kurt turned to the other Junket. "Come on. Let's go find a different junior to beat up." I felt successful. Kurt was never gonna fight me again. But when I saw him stomping over to Rulio, everything changed. I ran over to my best friend.

The senior burst out laughing. "Shades? In the middle of winter? If you want the weather forecast, it's cloudy with a slight breeze. No sun will be out for 3 months." Rulio's face looked scared. A different kind of face than the one where he was missing something important.

Kurt grabbed the sunglasses and tried them on. "What?! How do you manage to stay comfortable with these?" I crossed my arms. "Kurtis, don't lay a finger on him." The senior scoffed. "Oh, please. No matter what, you're still a tiny tot junior."

Kurt looked back down at Rulio, and he noticed the eyes. "What's that? Is that some weird shade of brown?" The senior took off the sunnies and a wicked grin spread across his face, toothpick still intact. "AUBURN EYES! HE'S A PSYCHOPATH!"

I ran in front of him. "No! Please! Rulio is a normal guy that just wants to live in Windvale. And he is my best friend. He is not mentally insane!" Kurt put a finger on my chest. "And how do you know that? Do you ever wonder what's underneath? On the inside of Rulio Scherer?"

I looked back at Rulio, he shook his head fiercely. I looked back up at Kurt. "He is a regular junior." The senior pushed me aside, took out his fist, and slammed it right in Rulio's right eye. Kurt smirked, toothpick on the corner of his mouth. "I like the new eye change. Auburn to black."

Rulio started crying. I looked back up at Kurt. "Kurtis Norman Churchwill, you will stop this right now." The senior put his hands on his hips. "What are you? The principal?" Rulio grabbed my arm to help up. "Jayman, don't get into this. I know what to do."

My best friend walked up to Kurt. The senior put his toothpick in between the index and middle fingers. “What? You want another *black* eye?” Rulio took the toothpick and held it up. Kurt was caught off guard. “Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa. Give me that. It still hasn’t lost its flavor yet. Minty.”

Before I tell you what happens next, please opt out and skip to the next chapter if you have motion sickness. If you choose to read the rest of this, then gladly do! But remember this warning if you gasp.

Rulio took the toothpick and stabbed Kurt in the right eye. The eye rolled by the other Junket’s shoe. And you wanna know the craziest part? I DIDN’T YAK! (I was very close, though.)

I was shaking. My best friend was always just a slow-paced, chill, nice guy. But this was a complete turnover. I slowly walked up behind Rulio. “Hey…you okay? Do you…want some water? A BLT sandwich from Granny Urchin’s? I can give you a discount.”

When Rulio looked at me, I didn’t see a sweet, sensitive guy with a slight smile. I saw something else. In the end, it turned out to be a hallucination, but I saw a guy with disorganized golden hair, eyes with no pupils, and a wicked grin spread across his face, blood dripping out of it. He was going insane.

My eyebrows went together with worry. “You know what? That BLT sandwich can be free.”

Rulio didn’t respond. He just walked away back to his shack. It’s safe to say I did not have school that day.

See, I wasn’t kidding, it’s a book about eyes!

Chapter Three

Chapter Three - Jayman

For those of you that skipped ahead to this chapter, welcome back! If you didn't read the fine print, Rulio is going insane. Apparently those auburn eyes never lie.
In this chapter, you will be getting the interior of what it's like to work at Granny Urchin's Pub n' Club. And trust me on this: It is not fun whatsoever. Give me a freaking break.
I put on my dinky uniform and walked over to the diner. There were four other workers there.
Mrs. Wallas, who is the boss. She is one *strict* person.
Jacque, the janitor. Don't tell him I said this, but the cleaning isn't really improving the place. Sorry.
Chef Robin. The only chef there. And I'm not lying when I say the only good thing he's made is the BLT sandwich.
And finally, Dala. Also known as the person who assigns seats.
None of our backstories are enthralling at all. Originally, we were just some jobless people that happened to get lucky when they built Granny Urchin's. Welcome to Windvale. Everyone that lives here is unemployed. Yipp freaking eee.
We got a total of five customers today. And one of them will greatly impact this book. So let's play a game. I will give a description of each of them and how they acted, and then you can guess who it is!
The first customer was an old man with a cane. He was almost bald, with two white hairs crossing over each other. He had a half shaved mustache. He walked up to Dala and said, "Aye! Just me eating here for now..." The guy fell asleep on the podium. He woke up with a start. "AYE! Uh...is Charlene calling? Sorry, dearie. I need to leave." The old man walked out. I don't know if I would call him a customer, but it was random for us.
The second customer was a 15-year-old girl that looked like she came straight from Sunshine World, which doesn't even exist! She had curly blonde hair and hazel eyes. And boy, she loved to ramble. The girl walked up to Dala all cheery, completely ignoring the vibe of this weird diner. And this is what she said: "Hi! My name is Cherry. I came here for the lollipops! I heard that you were having a discount on them! Do you have them in pink?" Everyone that worked at Granny Urchin's looked at her with genuine confusion. Once the girl realized, she giggled. "Whoopsie daisy!" She skipped right out of there. Ugh. Why can't we be a NORMAL DINER?! Thankfully, that wish came true.
The third customer was surprisingly normal. He had curly dirty blonde hair, a pale green hat with a ripped bill, and brown eyes. The guy actually ate something. He ordered a Dr. Pepper for his drink, and a shredded chicken taco for his meal. But there was one suspicious thing

about him. He ate his taco slower than I have ever seen someone eat a taco. Thankfully, he did end up actually leaving the diner.

The fourth and fifth customers were two twins with weird accents. One of them pounded the podium and yelled "SEAT FO TWO! SEAT FO TWO!" They were just pure chaos the entire time. It angered me *and* Mrs. Wallas, which is a rare event at Granny Urchin's. Mrs. Wallas ended up kicking them out, which was definitely the right decision.

Alright, have you tallied it all up? If you haven't, then reread the freaking descriptions. And the answer is…drumroll please…Customer #3! I'm gonna tell you about the entire day excluding the other customers. Here we go.

So, Granny Urchin's opens at 10:00 AM for lunch time. My job before the customers come in is very strange. You see, Mrs. Wallas is always assigning us spots that way we're ready to go when the customers come in. And the spots are always so specific. It's not like, "Stand right by the fridge and don't move a muscle." It's more like, "Stay at something something x, something something y." I'm not even kidding. Mrs. Wallas has a paper with the coordinates for us written on us. Told ya she was strict!

I never remember the coordinates I'm assigned to. Even though she says it right before I stand there, Mrs. Wallas always says it really fast for some reason. I could've sworn that yesterday, she said, "Jayman, please stay at 447848718485539 and don't move." Wherever she points, my feet just remain planted.

There was something new in the diner today. On the walls, we have pictures of urchins all over, because of the name "Granny Urchin's", but today, something was plastered over all of the pictures.

From a distance, it just looked like an advertisement for some cliche tire brand, but then I realized it was something really important. Once I walked inside, I noticed it said "WANTED" in big bold letters on the top, and a picture of Rulio was in the middle. Right underneath it, it said "REWARD IS 500 BUCKS." This is not good.

My best friend was the number one target in Windvale right now. And the population isn't exactly big. (The population is 107, in case you're wondering. Not including the students from surrounding cities that go to Windvale Learning. Yes, I know there are only five people. That's because most people decide to reside in shops that sell furniture. Consider me lucky to live in a two room Barbie house. Woo freaking hoo.)

Basically, someone could easily find him. And if they did, then that would not be pretty. Dala walked up to me. "What do *you* think of the sign?" She had a thick Southern accent. I sighed in response. "I don't want my best friend sent to jail." Dala's eyes widened a little. "Wait. You know Rulio Scherer?" I nodded slowly.

Mrs. Wallas walked up behind us and hit us in the backs. “PLACES! You guys don’t like to listen, do you?” Dala went back to the podium, and I went back to my original spot. Everyone else was frozen in place. And then some people finally came to the diner.

Right after the second customer of the day left, Jacque walked up to me. “Hey, Jay Man. What do you think of my new cleaning material?” He slipped and landed on his butt. “It’s right on my feet!” I looked down and saw dirty ponchos covering his shoes.

“Well, Jacque, if you stop pronouncing it Jay Man and start saying JayMIN, I would compliment it. But otherwise, that is a filthy thing that looks like turd sprawled on your white shoes. I don’t recommend it for cleaning or for the rain.”

Jacque sighed. “Darn it. I can never make good material for this place.” And he never will. Don’t tell him I said that.

Chef Robin sighed from the kitchen. “How am I supposed to work if no one wants food?” Even though the BLT sandwich is the only good thing he’s made, Chef Robin made a really good point. It’s like Mrs. Wallas is paying us a cent to do nothing. At Granny Urchin’s, of all places.

That’s when the third customer came in. Everyone went back to normal. The guy walked up to Dala. “Hello. It’s just me here today.” She walked him over to a table. I gave him a moment to look at the menu, and I strolled on over.

“Welcome to Granny Urchin’s Pub n’ Club. Try our BLT sandwich. What drink can I start you off with? Perhaps a Coca-Cola?” The guy shook his head. “Nope. I’m a Dr. Pepper person, speaking from the heart.” I nodded. “It will be here immediately.”

I walked up to the counter. Chef Robin was sleeping on a chair right by the island of food ready to go. “ROBIN! DR. PEPPER, PLEASE!” Chef Robin immediately woke up with a jolt and gave me the Dr. Pepper. “Here! Now let me have peace next time, Jay Man.”

I walked over to the guy. He was smiling. “Wow. Is your name really Jay Man? What type of parents do you have?” I sighed. “Give me a second.” I turned around. “TO EVERYONE WORKING HERE, IT’S FREAKING JAYMIN!” The guy chuckled. “Nah. I still prefer Jay Man. Sounds like some sort of hero. Tell me: Do you fight alongside Spider Man?”

I turned back to him. “What would you like to eat?” The guy cleared his throat. “I’ll take a shredded chicken taco, please.” I nodded. “It will be here right away.” He smiled. “Thanks, Jay Man.” My freaking gosh.

I walked up to Chef Robin, who was trying to sleep again. “Look, Robin. I can’t have you sleeping on the job. Give me a shredded chicken taco.” The chef sighed. “Get it yourself. Walk in the room, grab and go. Simple as that.”

I grunted. “Do you want Mrs. Wallas to fire us?” Chef Robin shrugged. “I don’t care. No one pays me a dime.” I sighed. “Look, Robin. No matter how weird your food is, or how crappy this diner

is, Granny Urchin's cannot run without a chef. Now let me have that taco. The customer can hear this conversation."

That made him wake up and hand me the taco. I walked back over to the guy. "Here you go. Sorry about the ruckus back there. Granny Urchin's isn't exactly a professional restaurant. The taco was five bucks." The guy shrugged. "Jay Man, I don't really care. Ticks, I've actually quite adapted to this place."

I facepalmed myself. "Okay. New rule: If you're going to call me Jay Man, I should at least know *your* name. Fess it up, nimrod." The guy smiled and took a sip of his drink. "Ticks. You're oddly serious. Darb Roberts." That name right there is gonna be really important in the future. Remember that, folks!

I nodded. "Cool. And what do you do for a living?" Darb paused for a second, and then smiled. "I work at…a tire shop. We've got all sorts of tires. Would you like one?" I scrunched my eyebrows. "There are tire shops near here? I don't even have a freaking car."

Darb put his hands behind his head. "We're handing out coupons tomorrow. Maybe you can stop by and get one." I shook my head. "No thanks. But anyways, are you finished with your meal today?" He nodded. "Yes. Nice meeting you." I sighed. "Weird meeting you."

Darb walked out of the diner. Mrs. Wallas yelled from the corner, "ALL RIGHT! LET'S TAKE FIVE HERE!" Jacque walked up to me. "Hey, Jay Man. What did you think of the customer?" I sighed. "Annoying."

Jacque smiled. "Was he…sloppy? Could I perhaps clean up the mess he made? Shoot. I forgot my duster." I stopped him from getting it. "Don't even bother. Granny Urchin's is a nightmare already."

Mrs. Wallas slapped me across the face. "JAYMAN! When you serve, you need to smile. I don't want a one star review, and neither do you! So shape up and be happier!" I grunted. "What is it with you? Always wanting me to look sharp and cheery at a small diner that gets a maximum of 10 customers per day? Please. That just makes me even *more* tired."

She crossed her arms. "Well, don't be quitting on me. We need a server, and you're the best one we could find here in Windvale." I nodded. "Yeah, yeah. Whatever you say."

The rest of the day was exhausting. Chaotic customers, Jacque slipping, Chef Robin sleeping, Dala screaming, Mrs. Wallas being Mrs. Wallas. Today was not a good day for me.

But that was just the beginning. Of a new time period that I felt like was stuck on an eternal loop.

Chapter Four

Chapter Four - Jayman

I know what you're thinking. ANOTHER POV WITH JAYMAN?! WHY CAN'T WE MOVE ON ALREADY?!

Listen. I don't want another POV with me, either. So let's just get through this chapter so we can all be happy. Got it?

Granny Urchin's was always closed on Sundays, so today was my off-day. I was relaxing in my house jamming to some music, when I heard brakes. Just so you know, my entire life of living here, I have never heard a car drive by my house. Ever.

I looked outside through one of my windows. There was a shiny red convertible parked right in front of the other house right by mine. No. No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no. The 137 year break was over. Somebody was moving in.

I couldn't see *that* clearly thanks to the dust on my window, but I saw a figure hop out of the car. He took his hat off and let his hair bask in the sunlight. Oh, yeah! Forgot to mention: It's always warm here in Windvale. Another annoying thing about this place.

Anyway, the guy put his hat back on. Wait, wait, wait. Am I saying this stuff right? Let's do a quick recap here. (Took his hat off…put it back on. Obviously, the guy is wearing a hat. Oh no…)

I walked out just to double check. And guess what? I was correct. Darb Roberts was gonna move in next to me. Woo freaking hoo.

I stomped over to Darb. Did he not understand that I didn't actually *want* anyone living next to me?

"Hey! Why are you moving in? I prefer to be *alone. Without* a bunch of noisy neighbors."

Darb burst out laughing. "Oh, please! Judging by your attitude, my volume is going to be at a minimum, but yours will be at maximum. If you think I'm gonna be causing anything at all, then you should remind yourself you're the one yelling."

I cross my arms. "At least *I* don't speak as much." Darb adjusted his hat. "From now on, we will both be dead quiet. You got that?" I nodded. He smiled. With his teeth. I don't know why, but for some reason, whenever he did that, there was a shine in the corner of his mouth, flashing the teeth. It ticked me off big time, that's for sure.

Now, I knew Darb was never really that annoying in the past. When he stopped by at Granny Urchin's, he was probably the most normal customer we've ever had. Which feels extremely strange to say knowing his personality *now.*

I genuinely thought the guy was gonna keep his promise. But guess what? I was wrong! Woo freaking hoo.

Whenever I was laying on my bed, listening to the latest bops, something would fly right in my face. It was always a parchment of paper that was supposed to be a miniature letter, but not quite.
The paper always had some sort of mischievous phrase on it. For example: The first day this "war" started, the letter read:

I SEE AN ANT BEHIND YOU! BETTER GO KILL IT BEFORE IT BITES! -DARB

And you wanna know something even stupider? I actually fell for it. Yep! You heard that right. My scared butt turned around in horror, trying to find an ant crawling on my pillow. And you wouldn't believe my expression when I found out it was just a prank. Darb could see it all through my window, too. Yipp freaking eee.
Yeah. He was there to witness my little panic attack. The guy was cracking up when he saw me acting all frantic. So, I wanted to settle this once and for all. I sent him a letter back saying:

REMEMBER WHAT I STRICTLY SAID? NO TRICKS WHATSOEVER! -JAYMAN

I guess that, for a weird reason, that would end whatever Darb was planning. I guess I was just really dumb that day. Because whatever I sent to him had no effect at all. I already know you're curious about what he replied. Well, here ya go:

PFFT! DON'T BE A GOODY TWO SHOES! IF YOU'RE BORED WITH YOUR LIFE, THEN WHY NOT CURE IT WITH SOME INNOCENT JOKES? -DARB

And so it began.
Darb and I kept sending each other these goofy letters quarrelling over nothing at all and he kept reappearing at Granny Urchin's with one singular expression on his face: Snarky.
Seriously. The other day, he walked up to Dala, told her that it was just him for now. Remember what I said about Mrs. Wallas assigning the workers random positions before the first customer comes? Well, mine was in a tight and cramped place that no human being should be able to see. Well guess what? He freaking saw me.
Darb winked at me, and it just made me sigh. And now he's been doing that every time he comes back. I'm surprised no other worker has pointed that out yet.
A few weeks later, it was starting to drive me insane. I was finished with these endless letters of chaos. I walked up to Darb's house and knocked on his door.

He opened it up. "What do you want, Jay Man?" I sighed. "Listen. These letters have been going back and forth for three weeks now. And you want to know something *really* suspicious? All you've been doing is pranking me instead of working at your *tire shop*."
Darb smiled. "You caught me." I scrunched my eyebrows. "Wait, what? You're telling me that you were lying to me?" He nodded. "That's right. If you wanna know something: I hate tires. They always make me...tired."
I sighed at the lazy pun. "Can you tell me your story? Why are you *really* here?" Darb clasped his hands together. "Okay."

I always wanted to be a ringleader at a circus growing up. Why, you might ask? You see, my dad hosted a circus for the longest time. Whenever I watched him perform, I was inspired. And so were a lot of other people! *Everybody* wanted to watch my dad perform. But, on a day in August, my dad's career went down the drain. I vividly remember the scene. My dad had a curly mustache, blue top hat, sparkly red suit, and a shine in his eyes. He always held a cane in his left hand. In a very excited voice, my dad yelled: "PRESENTING…WELLON AND HIS LION!" Wellon was the lion tamer at the circus, so he ran through the door, his lion trailing behind him. Everything seemed normal, except for one thing: The trick they were going to do wasn't on the stage, ready. Wellon was going to throw tomatoes at the lion, and the animal was going to try to catch it. My dad initially thought that the tomatoes just hadn't been brought out yet and that the workers behind the curtains would reel it down. My dad and Wellon nervously smiled at the crowd, not realizing that someone in the audience had stolen them. After a minute or two, my dad lost his charm and broke character. "Um…just give us one second. Does that sound good, my people?" My dad expected a normal reaction, but he got the opposite of that. The crowd started booing him, calling him "untrustable" and "a fraud". My dad's face was more scared than I had ever seen it in my life. The person that had stolen the tomatoes started throwing them at him. Wellon and the lion both got scared and dashed off the stage. After the audience left the tent, my dad took off his hat and sat down. I walked up to him, and asked if he was doing okay. He shook his head. It's safe to say that *Maestro Roberts* was done ringleading. I had no idea if I wanted to take the hat or let someone else do it. I decided to take the hat. Let the legacy of

Maestro Roberts continue. I had memorized every move my dad did when performing, so I had a good idea of how I should talk to the crowd. I liked it, but I didn't think it was for me. I still don't understand how my dad wanted to perform for that long and still got a positive reaction from the audience every time. It was personally tiring for me. I let someone else that actually wanted to do the job take the hat. I went back home, but it wasn't much better there. My dad was still bummed out from the circus incident, and my mom was too busy taking care of my 6 other siblings. I don't know if any of them ever realized, but I ran away. Far away. I ended up in this one town. It confused me about what it was at first, but I got used to it. I met a few other people there, and they soon became some of my best friends ever. Maturing was realizing that that town was always meant for me. The snarky life. Where you just pranked each other 24/7. I came over to Windvale because I wanted to explore and I heard of a money prize for something?

My eyes widened a little bit. "Whoa. Hang on one second. Rulio is not for sale." Darb smiled. "Yes! *That* was his name! Thanks for reminding me. I gathered up the others, and we are going to put him in jail!"

I grunted. "Rulio is my best friend. With auburn eyes. No matter how he looks, he is still important to me. So don't even think about laying a finger on him." Darb sighed. "Then read *this* article."

He gave me a newspaper, the front page read: "20-YEAR-OLD MALE KILLS 13 PEOPLE!" My mouth gaped open. "Geez. What's wrong with him?" Darb crossed his arms. "Does that change your mind?"

I shook my head. "Here, let's make a deal: If Rulio's not as insane as this thing says, we don't put him in jail. But if he is insane and even threatens to kill us, we can put him in jail." He shrugged. "Sounds good to me. As long as we get our cut of the money." I rolled my eyes and shook Darb's hand.

He adjusted his hat. "We've gotta try to find out where Rulio is, because the newspaper says he left Windvale. But first things first, you need to meet the gang, Jay Man."

I scrunched my eyebrows. "Why are there more people involved in this?" Darb smiled. "I'm an undercover spy. We all are, I should say." He walked over to his red car and sat in the driver's seat. "Get in the front. Let me take you to them."

I reluctantly went into the convertible. Darb put on sunglasses. "Call us the Snarkies. And don't worry! None of us are strange in any way."

I clicked the seatbelt. "What do you mean by thAAAAAAAAAAAT?" The car took off with a sudden jolt. Darb's hat flew on the back seats. My cheeks were flapping like crazy. I screamed, "IS THIS REALLY NECESSARY?!" He smiled. "IT IS IF WE ARE OFFICIALLY CALLED 'THE SNARKIES'!"

The car skidded right in front of a Super Shell gas station. I put my hands on my hips. "Oh, great. We've already run out of gas." Darb shook his head. "Nope! Well, yes, but that's not the point. This is our headquarters!"

I raised an eyebrow. "What? You took this entire gas station to yourself?" He nodded. "You better believe it, Jay Man. The crew is inside. Trust me: You're going to love them!" I sighed. "I don't like being part of a group with 600 other people."

We walked inside. I didn't see anyone except two girls eating snacks at a small table. "Where *is* everyone?" Darb pointed at the two girls. "Right there. The others couldn't make it. They've got these things called job shifts and taxes…"

I put a finger to his lips. "You're telling me that you and a bunch of other people got hired to be undercover spies and your HQ is a gas station?!" He shrugged. "We're not exactly on a high budget. Excluding you, I only know five other people."

I sighed. "Introduce them, I guess." Darb smiled. "The girl with brown hair and hazel eyes is Viv Willins." I scrunched my eyebrows. "Is she dipping oranges into chocolate sauce?" He clenched his teeth together. "Yeah. It's her favorite food for some reason. It's the weirdest thing ever at first, but you get used to it after a while."

Darb pointed at the other girl. "The girl with blonde hair and blue eyes is Ocean Polo." I almost burst out laughing. "Ocean Polo?! Who in the world names their kid Ocean Polo?!" He adjusted his hat. "The only reason they named her that is because her eyes look like oceans. The Polo part is just her last name. There's no choice there."

Darb stood in between them. "Hey, guys…we have a new member of the group here." They both looked up. Viv smiled. "Hi! What's your name?" Ocean just waved. Darb put a hand on Viv's shoulder. "It's Jay Man."

I groaned. "For the last time, IT'S JAYMIN!" I heard Darb whisper in Viv's ear, "Jaymin is the correct pronunciation, but I like calling him Jay Man. It's got a good ring to it."

Darb pulled up a chair and sat down. "Welcome, Jay Man Hampton, to the Snarkies! You are officially a member now! Would you like a badge or do you just want a souvenir?" I sighed.

“First of all, I don’t want any of your dinky merch. Second of all, how do you know my last name?”
He smiled. “You accidentally wrote it on one of your letters last time. You were *very* confused that day.”
My eyebrows faced down. “I really don’t wanna waste time.” Darb adjusted his hat. “Pfft. Who said anything about *that?* We can start right now if you want.” I nodded. “Great. So, what do I do first?”

Chapter Five

Chapter Five - Rulio

Life isn't fair. That's all I've got to say.
I probably shouldn't have stabbed Kurt's eye, but my gut said otherwise. Now I have the urge to kill anyone with brown eyes, in case they're part of Kurt's little gang. I don't want to, but I have to.
That made me the number one target in Windvale. And probably a lot of other areas, too. A ton of people are moving in so they can find me. New houses are being built. And once they get that money, they can upgrade it.
Sometimes my head gets rough and it's really hard to think. Instead of regular words coming, it's just a bunch of gibberish. There's nothing I can do to stop it. It's like an incurable disease.
Remember that makeshift house Jayman was talking about earlier? I've got a whole bunch of those. I wasn't planning to ever use any of them, but now that everyone's out for me, I've been using them more and more.
I currently reside in one in the woods. Right between two large trees, so I get a lot of shade. Inside, there are two beds, a dresser, sink and oven, and a lot of other stuff that is used solely for fun.
For the longest time, there was nothing important in my house(s). Whenever Jayman dragged me to school, what I call a torture chamber, I didn't really miss anything. The Junkets still came by to my shack occasionally and called me names, so loneliness wasn't permanent.
But when Jayman brought me to school this time, he didn't even give me a chance to say goodbye to something. Well, that's a lie. Jayman actually gave me a really good chance, but I lied and said there was nothing in there. I don't know why I lied. It was stupid, after all.
You're probably wondering what was so important to me in my shack. Well, I'm going to tell you a story.

So, over winter break, I wanted to go snowboarding. There's a big hill over in the back of Windvale. The Junkets pretend that it only belongs to them, but that doesn't stop any other people from coming.

I wore snow goggles to cover my auburn eyes. I wore a winter hat, boots, jacket, and some other clothes underneath.

The Junkets were all laughing loudly and drinking. I ran to the top of the hill. It's a good thing that I had a bunch of stuff on, because they would have recognized me as a junior otherwise. And that wouldn't be pretty.

I loved my snowboard. It was dark blue, with a blue fire design on it. Not exactly suitable for winter, but I personally think fire always looks rad on stuff. Doesn't matter what!

I set up my snowboard at the top of the hill. The Junkets were hanging out at a tree behind me, laughing away and making horrible jokes. It was super annoying at first, but you kinda got used to it after a while. That sounds weird to say, but it's true if you have a gang of thugs at your school.

My feet were placed onto the snowboard. I took off. For a minute, everything was perfect. Nothing was in the way, the Junkets were long gone by now, and I felt like I was escaping a prison cell. That might sound strange, but it's not to me. But you get the point. Everything was crystal clear. Right up until my goggles flew off.

Snow started blowing in my eyes. I tried to look for a green spot in the snow. I was barely able to notice the goggles. They were sitting right by a giant lump of snow.

I walked over there. I heard muffled screaming. I looked back over at the Junkets. No wonder they were laughing so much. They stuffed someone underneath the snow.

I dug up the snow. A girl around my age with a brown wolf cut looked practically frozen laying there. "Wha- wha-" Her face was planted in the snow. I turned her over. She had widened green eyes. She sputtered stuff I couldn't understand. I nodded. "Look, I'll get you out of here, okay?"

I put my goggles inside my pocket. I picked her up like how a guy picks up his dog. It's a really good thing the Junkets didn't see me, because I was carrying the girl to my shack. When we got there, I set her on a bed and turned on the hot air machine. Her face went back to normal. "Whoa! Where am I? It feels like I haven't seen a single thing in 3 days."

I handed her some bread. "A group of mean people called the Junkets buried you in snow, and turned you over so your face was planted on it. I was snowboarding today, and my goggles happened to land beside the lump of snow you were underneath."

Her eyebrows perked up a bit. "Oh! *That's* why my brain is so fuzzy. What's your name? I'm Creste Lackey." I smiled. "Nice name. I'm Rulio Scherer."

Creste ended up living in my house. We called each other by our last names in case the Junkets recognized our first names and because it sounded more professional, which was funny to Creste.

So, yeah. Creste was the important thing. We enjoyed playing Monopoly, riding bikes, and taking out orange chicken from Granny Urchin's.

For Christmas, Creste gave me a cane with a raven's head on top of it. I carry it around all the time.

When Jayman picked me up, it felt like I was going away from everything that mattered. The worst part is that Jayman called me his best friend, and it would've sounded wrong if I said that he wasn't mine. I guess I made the right decision by lying.

But now I am going insane. And I can't stop myself, even when knowing that all of the stuff I'm doing is crazy. My cane was given to me for fun, not for killing, but my swirling mind can't stop myself.

You see, Creste and I are both pessimists. The glass is half empty, okay? Right after I stabbed Kurt's eye out, I ran to the makeshift house, panting. Creste was scrunching her eyebrows. "Scherer, what are you doing? Why do you have a black eye?"

I picked up my cane. "Lackey, I need your help for a very important task. Anyone that has brown eyes will be killed by me. I've had enough of these punks beating up my eyes because they're auburn."

I leaned over my bed, running a hand through my hair. I could feel Creste's eyes looking at me like I was insane. Can't say I wasn't. "Why do you need me? Scherer, why are you doing this in the first place?"

I felt my hands get thrown up in the air and grab Creste's collar on her shirt. "I don't want to do this, but I *have* to. And I'm going to need your help, Lackey. I can't do this alone."

Creste backed up a bit. "Scherer…you're mentally insane." My smile faded. "If I hear that one more time, then that's gonna become true. I wasn't like that before, but everyone assumed I was because of my stupid eye color. And everyone that says it has brown eyes. Well, the auburn needs to step back, so please…join me."

I held out a hand. Creste hesitated for a moment. And by a moment, I mean around 5 minutes of pure thinking. She stared at the ground, eyes darting from one side to another. My arm started to hurt, but then she had made a decision. Her eyes slanted back with confidence and took my hand.

That was a month ago.

I sat down in my chair, cane in one hand. My other arm was sitting against the armrest. Creste came back with a guy that was 100% from the Junkets.
The guy had curly ginger hair, brown eyes, and a slight beard on his chin starting to grow. Creste wickedly grinned. “Scherer, we have someone.”
I smirked. “Why, hello there. I recognize you from the Junkets. Tell me your name.” The ginger scoffed. “Like I would do that.” I held up the cane closer to his face. “You *will* tell me your name.”
His teeth started chattering, and he scooted back a bit. “Jert. Jert Hawkins.” I tapped my chin. “Well, *Jert.* You have a remarkable eye color. Tell me which shade of brown it is.” Jert scrunched his eyebrows. “I-I don’t know. Maybe copper?”
I nodded. “Copper. That’s nice. Did you know that copper is also the color of pennies? As in the coin?” He crossed his arms. “Yeah. Everybody owns a penny.” I leaned back. “Correct. But what is something not everyone has?”
Jert thought to himself. “A private jet.” I shrugged. “Also true. But the answer I was thinking of was different. I was thinking of 500 dollars, which is a very wealthy amount of money for a person in Windvale. 500 bucks can cover just about anything. Maybe not that private jet, but we could compromise.”
The ginger raised his eyebrows. “I have no idea where you’re going with this.” I snapped my fingers and pointed at Creste. “Lackey, how did you find Jert?” She cleared her throat.
“Jert was walking around with a few other people around his age. They were all discussing something. Something to do with money. Jert was laughing and often clinking his beer with the other ones. Whatever was happening there, Jert was the leader of it. I took a closer listen. They finally specified the money, and it was apparently a reward, too! 500 dollars, to be exact. Jert turned around, and I caught him.”
I nodded. “Mmm hmm. Yapping about 500 bucks, indeed.” Jert had a nervous look on his face. “No! She’s a liar!” Creste chuckled. “Guess what? I don’t have any proof for you.” He sighed with relief. “Great. Now please let me g-” She pulled out a camera. “Except for the assorted photos on my Polaroid.”
Creste displayed the pictures. Jert went back to his chalant look. “Why were you spying on me? This is stalking!” I walked behind him. “Oh, don’t worry. We already know what you and the Junkets are up to. You want *revenge.* You know full well that I was the one who stabbed out Kurt’s eye, so you are just going for the glory. Can’t say I don’t blame you. Well, guess what? I’m here. So take a weapon and just kill me right here.”
Jert smiled. “Perfect!” He pulled out a gun and held it up to my head. I tucked it down and smirked. “Nuh uh uh! You need to hear the disclaimer first. My itty witty brain forgot

to tell you! After this is done, I really need to go get it checked out." He groaned. "What dumb phrase do you have to say *now?*"
I tapped the raven on my cane. "You can't kill me if you're not killed first." Jert's face went pale white. "What are you sayAAAAAAAAAAH!" I took my cane and swept the beak down onto his heart. "Caught ya red handed and red haired."
Creste tied Jert's corpse inside a net and threw it in the storage area. I nodded. "There goes another one."
She put her hands on her hips. "Well, it looks like it's around bed time for me. Good night, Scherer." I smiled. "Before you start snoring, I would like to say that your Polaroid is really cool, and you played your part well. Nice job, Creste."

The next morning, I woke up. But I wasn't in my bed. Or any bed, to be exact. I was sitting on a desk outside, and it wasn't mine, either. I was strapped to it. That's when I saw the Junkets appear from behind the trees.
Kurt walked forward, an eye patch covering his right eye. He placed his toothpick in between his index and middle finger. "Welcome back, auburn. Yeah. I'm still alive. In fact, we have something in mind for today."
I scoffed. "And what is it? Some new device you made that you presume will stop me?"
Kurt shook his head. "No. But that isn't a bad idea…the point is: We heard some ruckus about you killing Jert and some other Junkets. Is that right?"
I sighed. "You see, I really enjoy telling stories. I used to do that all the time whenever I babysat my baby siblings. I had all of the classics: Hansel and Gretel, The Ugly Duckling, Red Riding Hood, I could keep going! I was horrible at telling them, though. I kept mixing up the words. But recently, I got a cane with a raven's head on it, and now I can tell stories very well with it! So, I will give you every last detail under one condition."
Kurt grunted. "And what is it?" I smirked. "Retrieve my cane. That's all you need to do. Better hurry up. I'm not one for being patient."
Kurt's eye widened. "What?! You…want *us*…to get a *stick* for you?! Just so you can tell us what happened to Jert?! I might as well just punch you five times in a row to get some words out of you."
Another Junket stopped Kurt. "Kurt…we know that doing that is not going to shut the guy up. You might as well just get the cane."

Kurt groaned. “Fine. I’ll get your cane.” The funny thing is, I had set it right outside the shack, which is where the Junkets were right now. Kurt reluctantly gave it to me. “Here you go. Now *what happened* to Jert?”

I looked down at the raven’s head. “Take a look at the cane. I’ll give you a moment for analysation. Notice how there’s a red spot on the beak. If you take a sniff, you’ll realize that it’s dried up blood. Now, the real stumper is this: Was it caused by me or Jert? Well, he was gathering a group from your gang, Kurt. And he was discussing *the prize.* The beautiful 500 dollar bonus for killing me. So, he set off, but my lackey was able to stop him and give me proof he was set off to kill me. I didn’t want him to get paid, I wanted to pay *myself.* So I took the cane and jabbed the beak in his heart. There you go, Kurt. You’ve got everything you must know.”

He raised his eyebrows. “WHAT?! Forget punching. I’m gonna take this cane and-” I smirked and stopped the cane from hitting my neck. “Hey, hey, hey. Why kill the man with his own object? That would be like convincing some of your Junkets into betraying you. So, please. Don’t make this more difficult.”

Kurt frowned. I chuckled. “Don’t fret. I’ll let you and your other Junkets go for today. But if you strap me to anything else anytime soon, then I might just have some second thoughts. So *leave.*”

Kurt and the Junkets angrily left. Once they were fully gone, I cleared my throat. “LACKEY! PLEASE UNSTRAP ME FROM THIS DESK!”

Creste ran over and untied the knots. I nodded. “Thanks, Lackey. Your help is really appreciated.”

We went back inside the shack. I set my cane back up against my bed. “Next time, we need to lock this thing better. I’ll just place a chair against the door.” Creste sat on her bed. “Night, Scherer.” I crossed my arms. “Night, Lackey.”

Chapter Six

Chapter Six - Rulio

I woke up the next morning and made myself some breakfast. When both Creste and I were finished, I stood up.
“Today, we should try to listen in on what the Junkets are planning. We’re going to need a disguise. What ideas do you have, Lackey?”
Creste tapped her chin. “Hip hop dancers? Workers at Granny Urchin’s?” I grabbed my cane. “I like the idea of hip hop dancers. And I have a couple of outfits for it! Around ten Halloweens ago, my brother and I wanted to dress up as hip hop dancers, but the costumes were far too big. I bet that they would fit us perfectly now.”
I rummaged through my old storage boxes and finally found the costume. My costume was round, pink sunglasses, an afro, and a white disco suit. My idol name was “Fizz.” Creste had the same costume, except that the sunglasses were square and white, and the disco outfit was pink. Instead of the afro, she just put her hair into a messy bun. Her idol name was “Whiz”.
I nodded at our costumes. “I can hardly recognize you, Lackey. Oops! I meant to say ‘Whiz’.” Creste smiled. “Come on. Let’s find some Junkets.”
We walked around Windvale, often crossing our arms to act all cool and mysterious. That’s when I noticed some Junkets sitting at a booth in Granny Urchin’s through the window, drinking beer.
We walked inside the diner. I heard muttering from them.
“500? That’s a big number.”
“It would be sweet to get your hands on it.”
“Where do ya think they might be, though?”
I realized they were talking about me when I saw the wanted sign of me covering the urchin pictures. A woman ran up to me and Creste. She had a name tag that read “Mrs. Wallas”. Mrs. Wallas scoffed. “What are you two cosplayers doing here? Do you want to eat something?”
I shook my head. “No, no, no, ma’am. We just came here to…perform! You’ve never heard of Fizz n Whiz?” Mrs. Wallas’ eyes widened. “FIZZ N WHIZ?! My father loved you two! I had no clue you came to Windvale! Especially Granny Urchin’s! Please, perform all you want.”
I shrugged. “Okay. Sounds good to us.” I walked up to the booth where the Junkets were sitting. One of them looked up and burst out laughing. “Aw…did you two fanatics book a gig or something?”

I put my hands on my hips. “A gig? I guess you could say that. EVERYBODY, IT’S FIZZ N WHIZ!” No one else was in the diner except for the Junkets. That sounded really stupid to shout, but at least Mrs. Wallas started clapping. I cleared my throat.
“My name is Fizz!”
“And mine is Whiz!”
“Together we are the Showbiz Sibs!”
“I have an afro!”
“I can play the cello!”
“If you think we’re ever gonna stop, that makes the sky yellow!”
The Junkets stared at us like we were some sort of monkeys singing about bananas. Meanwhile Mrs. Wallas was giving us the biggest round of applause ever. “BRAVO! BRAVA! Now how about another song?”
I shook my head. “Nah. We would love to, but we’re actually kinda hungry. All that rapping can make your appetite really increase these days. Even for Fizz n Whiz.” The Junkets groaned, but Mrs. Wallas was smiling her face off. “Perfect! You can sit right behind this group right here!”
Creste and I sat in our seats. She was sitting up against the Junkets’ seat. She placed a word detector up against it, and the words displayed in our sunglasses thanks to some pretty sweet technology.
“Ha ha ha! So anyways, about that deal you were talking about…Yes! 500 of those green strips of joy and the task to earn it is easy…What is it…You just have to kill some guy named Rulio Scherer! Kurt said he’s got auburn eyes…Ooh, that makes things even better. But who’s gonna be the one to kill him first…It should be me! I’ve got more stamina than you guys combined…No! It should be me! I’m easily the smartest and most tactical…Everyone shut up. I’m the strongest here. I could crush that guy in seconds…Everyone is incorrect. As the oldest at this table, *I* should be the one to do it…Wait! I have a peaceful resolution! What if we all kill him at the exact same time and then after the battle, we split the money?...BAHAHAHA! Yeah, right. One of us is getting 500 bucks fair and square…”
Once Mrs. Wallas and the other workers at Granny Urchin’s couldn’t see us at all, I motioned to Creste. “Get them,” I whispered. Creste took her net out and bundled them all up.

We were all back in the room again, Fizz n Whiz disguises still intact. The five Junkets we captured were still talking away a bunch of nonsense.
I walked up to them. “Hello, groovy people! I apologize for the terrible inconvenience. Did someone trap you?”
The Junket with a hat grunted. “Hey. It’s that Fizz guy again.” Bearded Junket burst out laughing. “The cheap rapper? You’ve gotta be kidding me!” Female Junket sighed. “His name is Whiz, guys. Do you not remember?” Goggles Junket smirked. “Oh, yeah. Thanks for the reminder.” Regular Junket nodded.
I crossed my arms. “How dare you confuse me. My name is Fizz! And don’t even think about telling Whiz this, but she’s not the real leader. And guess what? Neither am I! In fact, I’m not even a hip hop rapper named Fizz. I’m just a guy that happened to listen to your little conversation. And you want to know my real name?”
I tore off my costume and smirked. “Rulio Scherer.” Bearded Junket started squirming. “Oh, great! We can just kill him right here!”
I strolled on over to my cane. “And what weapons do you have? Your hands are trapped, your face is trapped, it’s safe to say that you’re stuck in there. Also, you shouldn’t even *start* to lay a finger on me without the safety instructions.”
All of the Junkets groaned. I smirked. “Rule Number One: I’m quite sensitive to flash photography, so none of that. Rule Number Two: If you just sit tight in that net, everything will go swell. And finally, Rule Number Three: Please don’t eat foods with walnuts in it. I’m allergic.”
Goggles Junket adjusted himself. “You’re telling me that the guy we were hunting for tied us up and won’t stop talking?” Hat Junket replied, “Really? I didn’t notice the guy standing right in front of us looking all devious! I was thinking about rainbows and lollipops.”
I tapped my cane. “So…what are your favorite foods? Pizza? Chicken?” Beared Junket coughed. “Your meat once you’re dead!” The other Junkets all went “YEAH!” at the same time.
I twirled my cane around. “Okay, folks. It seems that you’re somewhat into cannibalism. I’m against that. Personally, I prefer red meat.”
Hat Junket scrunched his eyebrows. “What’s *that* supposed to mean?” I held my cane up. “When I was a kid, I learned that carnivores eat only meat, and thanks to our flesh, we’re considered red meat.”
I stabbed the beak of my cane into their hearts. Creste appeared from behind and gave me a high five.

We went back into the shack and relaxed. Creste looked back over at me. “Scherer, why do you keep killing the Junkets?” I sighed. “I’m sorry, but I can’t help it. I really don’t want to, but it feels like I have to.”

She scrunched her eyebrows. “If you hate doing it, then why do you keep using banter?” I tapped my cane. “I thought to myself: If I’m gonna keep doing this thanks to my brain, why not make some fun out of it? So I tried joking around a bit to entertain myself. I think the jokes are lame and uninspired.”

Creste burst out laughing. “There is *no way* you just said that. I absolutely love your quips! They add tons of character, and they make things more interesting! So, Scherer, don’t stop with it, just keep going!”

I nodded. “Thanks, Lackey. That helps. Now we best get to bed. We’ve got another day of dead Junkets tomorrow. Don’t worry. I’ll make funny remarks, too.”

Chapter Seven

Chapter Seven - Jayman

Darb flung his car keys around. “Thanks to Ocean, we were able to track where Rulio last put his car. I betcha we can find some sweet information in there.”
The four of us walked to his convertible. I raised an eyebrow. “What’s it usually like in here?”
Darb smiled. “You’ll see.”
Viv put her hands behind her head. “Loud, obnoxious, and Darb breaking the speed limit!” Darb groaned. “Viv, I wanted it to be a surprise. It’s really funny when Jay Man doesn’t know what’s going on. But I can’t say Viv is wrong. The average experience is just like that.”
I adjusted myself in my seat. “So, where is Rulio’s car? Does he even have one?” He pointed at the map. “Yep. A shiny one, too. It’s at 182 Bacon Avenue.” I scrunched my eyebrows. “But that’s where Granny Urchin’s is.” Darb shrugged. “What can I say? We all get hungry.”
I sighed. “So, basically, if we GAAAAAAAAAAH!” The car took off, wind blowing in our faces. I groaned. “You really like being efficient, huh, Darb?” He smiled in response. “Right on point, Jay Man!”
The car continued to zoom. I was able to see Granny Urchin’s in view after a few minutes, so I pointed to it. “OVER THERE, DARB!” He gave me a thumbs up. “GREAT! I’M JUST GONNA MAKE A RIIIII-”
The car fell down a ravine, crashing it into the water. All of the fish in there instantly swam away. My face, which was planted against the window, groaned. “Couldn’t you have taken the way where the ravine isn’t in the way?”
Darb chuckled. “Yeah, my map isn’t so great. It hasn’t been updated since before the ravine even opened.” All of us sighed. He shrugged. “Sorry.” I shook my head. “No. It’s fine. Granny Urchin’s is just around the corner anyway. We just need to find a way to get out of here.”
I looked around nervously, trying to find a way where I could easily get out. I noticed Viv behind me, grunting. Her foot was caught underneath the car door. I crawled over there and offered a hand. “Hey, you need some help?”
She nodded. “Yeah. My foot got stuck when the car braked.” I took Viv’s hand and started to pull out. “Alright. Let’s try to get out in 3, 2, 1!”
I pulled as hard as I could, but the foot wouldn’t budge. I raised an eyebrow. “Weird. Hang on one second. DARB!” Darb turned around and adjusted his hat. “What do you want, Jay Man?” I pointed at Viv. “Her foot got stuck inside your car’s door.”
He whistled. “Ticks. Even the Jay Man himself couldn’t pull her out on his own.” I groaned. “Enough with the superhero jokes! I need more force or she’s gonna be trapped in there for longer than needed!”

Darb scootched over. "Okay, fine. I'll take your hand." He grabbed onto me, I grabbed onto Viv, and then I fixed my posture.
"Okay, on three. 1, 2, 3!" Darb and I pulled again, but the foot was still really stuck in there. My eyes widened. "This is really trapped in there, isn't it?"
Darb yelled for Ocean. She looked up at us with a blank expression. Darb sighed. "Look. Viv's foot is dead stuck underneath the car door, so Jay Man tried to help. Unfortunately, his strength wasn't good enough, so he made me come over. I pulled the hardest I possibly could, but Viv's foot wouldn't budge! So, Ocean, we need you to help us with all the force you have in your body!"
Ocean smiled, and she grabbed Darb's hand. I rolled my eyes. "Again. On three. 1, 2, 3!" The three of us, with combined strength, pulled. Viv's foot moved a tiny bit. I smiled. "IT'S WORKING!" We continued to pull hard, and after a few more wiggles, Viv's foot was finally free!
Darb clapped his hands together. "Yes! Round of applause for us!" Viv grunted. "My foot doesn't feel so great."
Darb went over and checked it. "Yeah, that's a pretty bad sprain right there. Listen up, folks. I'm no doctor whatsoever. If anyone has any medical knowledge, please use it. Ocean, you're the smartest out of all of us. Do *you* know anything about healing a sprain?"
Ocean sadly shook her head. Darb's eyes widened. "WHAT?! You placed a tracker inside a random guy's car, but you don't know how to heal a foot?!"
I scratched my head. "I actually know something about fixing a sprain." Darb smiled. "Great! But how do you know how to do it?" I crossed my arms. "Not only was I the waiter at Granny Urchin's, but I was also the medical guy. Mrs. Wallas may have taught me a thing or two about healing."
Darb moved his fingers around. "Yeah…we're gonna be needing you a whole bunch this trip, buddy. So…can you start doing the magical healing thing you mentioned?" I scoffed. "It's no magic." Viv shouted, "Look! A cabin!" I shrugged. "Never mind. Maybe it *is* magic."
We all peeked over the car window. Viv was right - there was a cabin, sitting there. There were some lights on, a strong foundation, and a sign right out front that said: "FREE TO USE!" Honestly, this was nicer than my actual house.
I stared at it in amazement. Darb was smiling his face off. "We have a place to stay, people!"
We all walked inside the cabin. It looked like a cabin that could've been used for a nature reserve, which was not bad at all! In the fridge, someone had left 2 12 packs of Dr. Pepper, which made Darb very happy.
"THERE'S SO MUCH! I AM NEVER GOING BACK TO MY HOUSE!" Darb took a can out, and I snatched it from him. "Thanks, Darb." He scoffed and took it back. "Ticks, dude! Don't borrow my Dr. Pepper!"

He chugged down the entire can, and then he threw it in the recycling bin. I nodded. “Now *that* is talent.”
I helped Viv over to a bed, and then she laid down. I brushed my hands. “I’ll grab some medical supplies.” I walked over to the first aid kit on the wall, and then took some stuff out.
“We’re going to need some bandages, some NSAIDs, and some water for it, and for me because you’ve just gotta stay hydrated.”
I took out the bandages and wrapped them around Viv’s ankle. I gave her some NSAIDs, and then stretched. “Okay. Just rest your foot for now. You should feel better by tomorrow morning.”
I walked away, and Darb whistled. “Ticks. You really know the doctor stuff. I can’t wait for when the rest of us get an injury and you’re the one simultaneously healing all of us at once.” I put my hands on my hips. “That’s never gonna happen. You would just complain the whole time. Viv is quiet, respectful of my attitude at the moment.”
Darb smiled. “And by at the moment, do you mean all the time? Every time I look at you, you’re just all grumpy.” I shook my head. “I smiled when Viv’s foot got out of your stupid door.” He pointed at me. “Wow. I’m so annoying, but Viv isn’t? You know we’re really good friends that go way back, right? She even admitted she’s a proud member of the Snarkies!”
I rolled my eyes. “*Viv* didn’t move in next to me. And she certainly didn’t constantly send me prank letters.” Ocean groaned. “Quit yapping!” Darb and I immediately stopped talking. That was the first time I’ve ever heard Ocean speak.
Darb stuck his tongue out at me. “Whatever. If I’m still considered obnoxious around you, then so be it!” I nodded. “Good. Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m tired. So I will go to bed.” Darb put his hands up. “Hey! That’s fine with me.”
I walked over to a bed to the right of Viv’s. I rested for around 20 minutes, and then sleep came over me.

Morning came, and I woke up. Of course everyone else had woken up before me. I walked over to Viv. “How does your foot feel?” She nodded. “Much better. Your healing is great.” I smiled. “Great.”
Darb chuckled from behind me. “Looks like I don’t need to drive 2 hours to the doctor anymore! Ticks, I’ll just walk on over to Jay Man’s house.”

I rolled my eyes. “Maybe don’t get yourself into so much trouble and we can avoid that.” He scoffed. “Um, no! I call myself a Snarky for a reason, buddy.”
I sat down on my bed. Viv sat upwards, butt planted down. I looked over at her. “Does it hurt?” She shook her head. “No.”
Darb rubbed his hands together. “Okay. I remember some stuff about fixing a car from a repair shop I worked at for about a year. I’m gonna go outside and attempt to fix it. Ocean, you’re coming with me. You’re the smartest here, although Jay Man is reportedly amazing at first aid.”
Ocean, with a blank expression as usual, walked up and followed Darb to the crashed car. I tucked my legs up and wrapped my arms around them. Viv asked suddenly, “Why do you and Darb fight a lot?”
I laughed a bit. “He recently moved in next to me, which made me mad because I love being alone with no noisy neighbors. And so that changed my daily mood. Darb, being as snarky as he is, always enjoyed pranking me, which went on for 3 weeks. Then he said he needed me for something, and I got really scared I was going to kill my former best friend with a bunch of other obnoxious people.”
Viv scrunched her eyebrows. “Do you think Ocean and I are annoying?” I shook my head. “Not at all. Ocean barely says a word, and you’re really nice.”
We sat there for a moment. I could’ve sworn I heard rustling outside. At first, I assumed it was just Darb and Ocean, but they were in a different direction. The rustling was slowly getting louder, and I was getting even more worried.
I got up from my bed and creaked open the door. Darb was talking to Ocean, asking for ways that could help with the car. I heard the rustling again. It was coming from bushes behind me. It definitely wasn’t Darb and Ocean.
I slowly turned around, nervous. I didn’t see anything, but the bushes were moving a whole bunch. It could’ve just been a small animal that gets easily scared away, like a bunny or a squirrel. That’s when I heard a groan.
It didn’t sound like it came from Viv, Darb, or Ocean. It sounded like it came from an animal. And not a small one like a bunny or squirrel. A bigger one, like a bear.
That’s when I saw it. A giant grizzly bear getting up from its nap, yawning. I stood there, frozen. Darb and Ocean were still working behind me.
The bear locked eyes with me. A frown slowly formed on my face. The bear roared, and I couldn’t help it. I screamed. The first thing I did was run into the cabin.
Darb and Ocean followed, realizing there was a life size bear living in the ravine.
The bear was clawing at the window, trying to get in. I turned around. “Okay. Everybody, go to a different room where the bear cannot see you!”

Darb and Ocean ran into other rooms, but Viv stayed. I forgot that she couldn't get up because of her foot. I put a hand in front of you. "Don't bother trying to go somewhere else. I'll take care of this."

I don't even know what I just promised. I'm not strong at all. I was definitely not made to face a grizzly bear. Woo freaking hoo. I turned around, and the bear was still very mad.

That's when it snapped. The bear got so mad that when it clawed at the window again, the glass broke into shards. A big, beefy roar ran out across the cabin. I wanted to scream, but I couldn't. I had to hold it in.

I grabbed a broom that was sitting near the beds. I held it up to the bear's face. I was expecting it to rip it up into pieces, but it just stood there. The grizzly was genuinely confused at why I chose a broom of all weapons.

I slowly pushed the broom forward, and I used it to tickle its eyes and nose. That made the bear roar a whole bunch, which may not have been the smartest move, but at least it did make some sorta impact.

The bear's hands cupped its face, and when I held up the broom again, the grizzly ran away. Back to wherever its original cave was.

So, yeah. I saved the cabin with a broom. Definitely wasn't expecting there. Darb and Ocean went back into the room. Darb patted me on the back. "Ticks, Jay Man! You're great at healing, *and* you can stop a bear? There's no stopping with you!"

Ocean just nodded. I wasn't really expecting much from her. Viv stood up and gave me a hug. "Thank you so much for saving me!" I smiled. "Yeah, sure, sunshine. I couldn't let your injured foot get even more hurt."

I was expecting Darb to tease me, but he actually remained fairly normal. "By the way, I was able to get the car running again. And Ocean was able to find a smooth path up for driving in this ravine!"

I nodded. "It's a win for all of us, then. Tomorrow morning, we're gonna get out of this stinking place. Now, who wants a Dr. Pepper?"

Chapter Eight

Chapter Eight - Viv

Darb scoffed. “Dr. Pepper lines belong to *me,* Jay Man.”
That’s true. Every time I hung out with Darb in the past, he was almost always drinking a Dr. Pepper.
We pretended to have a feast in a kingdom, and the champagne was just Dr. Pepper. Jayman was the king, I was the queen, Darb was the royal advisor, and Ocean was the pet.
Jayman was like no one I had ever met before. At first, I thought he was a pure grump through and through, but he actually showed his caring side when he was healing my foot.
I decided to take a look around the cabin, explore each of the rooms. There was one brown door I saw, right across from my bed.
There was a sign on it. It read “DO NOT ENTER!” I wonder what *that* meant. While the others were talking away to each other, I slightly creaked open the door. There was one thing I noticed in that room: stairs. I slowly went inside, and then quietly shut the door again. I walked upstairs, and the further I got up, the more I heard humming.
I was scared at first, thinking it was a wasp nest, but then another noise came, and it sounded like this: Doo-doo-doo. There definitely weren't any bugs.
It had to have been a human, which was strange, since it said the cabin was free to use.
I continued to walk up, and then a man sitting down at a table came into view. He had curly black hair, a straight mustache, and a broad chin. He was wearing a sombrero, and a purple tuxedo on.
I walked up to him. “Hello?” The man jumped back. “Aah! Oh. My apologies.” He had a thick Spanish accent. I scrunched my eyebrows. “What are you doing here?”
He chuckled. “I guess I haven’t properly introduced myself yet.” The man clapped his hands, and Spanish party music started playing. He smiled. “I am Mr. Encanto, the one and only romance expert!”

Darb yelled from outside, “WHAT IS GOING ON IN THERE?!” I held a finger up to my lips, and Mr. Encanto turned off the music. “Oh. My apologies again.”
Mr. Encanto put his feet up on the table and pulled out a really old Windvale vacation guide. I scrunched my eyebrows. “Why are you here?” He smiled. “Because I live here. And there’s one thing I’ve noticed every time more than one person has stayed in this cabin. I listen through the walls, and someone is always forming a crush on someone. It’s beautiful, really.”
I sat down in the chair across from him. “I don’t have a crush.” Mr. Encanto held up a device in my face. “My romantic lie detector says otherwise! You see, I listened to your voices. Judging by yours, you must be Viv, correct? And the other three are Jay Man, Darb, and Ocean?”
I pulled my chair back with worry. “First of all, you’re right. Second of all, it’s pronounced Jaymin.” Mr. Encanto’s eyes widened a little. “Ah. I see. Well, let’s find out who you *really* have a crush on. Because my detecting machine says it’s one of the people in there.”
He hooked me up to the device before I could even say anything. His eyes remained laser focused on the screen. After a minute or two, he grinned. “YES! I’ve got it!”
I rolled my eyes. “What did you find?” Mr. Encanto pointed at me. “You have a thing for…JAYMAN HAMPTON!” Jayman yelled from outside, “WHO SAID MY NAME?!”
I told Mr. Encanto to be quiet. He pressed his fingers against the machine. “Was your crush formed when he healed your foot? Or am I bluffing?” I shook my head. “No. He healed my foot.” Mr. Encanto nodded. “Okay. But do you…like him?”
I sat there. The thing is…I did. Mr. Encanto’s device actually worked. I slowly nodded. Mr. Encanto smiled. “Great! Trust me: You came to the perfect guy. So, what do you want? Romantic advice? A list of my exes? Just name it, Viv.”
I adjusted myself. “Advice. On how to speak to him.” He clasped his hands together. “Okay. Listen up. It seems you only met him a couple of days ago, so I wouldn’t immediately tell him that you like him. I would wait at

least three more days to fess up. During those three days, you should hang out with him as much as possible. Forget Darb. Forget Ocean. Just remember the main goal here: Jayman. Now, I'll tell you *how* to confess. Men are a lot harder to tell since they usually act a lot more reserved than women. I would know. And judging by his personality readings, he is mostly grumpy. So, don't be over the top about it. Here, I'll act out how you should act for you. Imagine this mannequin right here is Jayman. And imagine I'm you. This is what you should say: Jayman…we've hung out a lot…and it's really fun getting to know you. Knowing how Jayman usually acts, he'll probably respond with a 'Yeah, yeah.' Now, the next thing that should come out of your mouth is: And…I've learned something. It's very hard to get out of my gut, but…I like you. A lot. And then Jayman will take the lead from there. Alright, our session's up. I would recommend getting out of this attic and hanging out with your friends."

Mr. Encanto winked at me. I nodded. I got up and pushed my chair in. He smiled. "Bye, Viv! I wish you good luck!" I got out of the attic. When the others came into view, Darb groaned. "There you are! We thought you had disappeared!"

Jayman and Ocean were playing a board game. Ocean put her last pawn into the home station. Jayman sighed. "You win. Again."

He looked over at me. "Oh, great. You're back from whatever you were doing. I could've sworn someone yelled my full name." I shook my head. "No! You were just hallucinating."

Jayman shrugged. "Whatever you say, I guess. I am a bit tired. That's probably the reason."

Darb brushed his hands together. "I'm gonna go check on the car. Maybe park it in front of the smooth slope."

I sat on my bed, Jayman sat on his. He looked at me with boredom. "So, what's your story? How did you become friends with Darb and Ocean?"

I smiled slightly. "It's an interesting tale, really. This is how it goes: All my life, I lived in a town called Trenchest. It wasn't the cleanest town, but it was home to me. There were many apartments there. I was sitting on a bench with Ocean and three other friends right outside our apartment. We were talking about life, future goals, and other stuff. That's when we

saw Darb. He was running with torn clothes, a hat with a ripped bill, and mangled hair. Darb looked at us, heavily breathing. I walked up to him and told him that he can be our friend. He moved in with Ellias, Sorem, and Anika. He quickly adapted. When Darb heard about the money prize, he immediately wanted to go to Windvale. Ellias, Sorem, and Anika didn't want to go, but Ocean and I did. So, we came to Windvale, and now we're on the hunt."

Jayman nodded. "Nice story." I put my hands behind my back. "You said you were best friends with Rulio, right?" He sighed. "Yeah. I hate to admit it, but it's true. He's definitely not anymore, knowing his new personality."

Darb clapped his hands together. "Okay, everyone! It's bedtime now. We're gonna get out of the ravine tomorrow, so sleep well!"

Jayman set his head onto his pillow, and then he smiled at me. "Good night." I smiled back. "Night, Jayman."

Chapter Nine

Chapter Nine - Jayman

We all went inside Darb's car, and the doors got cushions on their bottoms, so no one's foot could get stuck. Darb smiled. "Alright. Let's get out of here!"
He backed the car up, and then, with a push on the gas pedal, the car zoomed up, sliding on the ravine exit, shaking me. "I THOUGHT YOU SAID THIS WAS SMOOTH!" Darb shrugged. "AT LEAST WE'RE GOING UUUUUUUUUP!"
The car jumped back down on the ground, parked right outside Granny Urchin's. My eyes slightly widened. "Shoot. Make sure Mrs. Wallas doesn't see me." I ducked down underneath the seat. Darb smirked. "HEY, MRS-" I cupped a hand over his mouth. "No! Don't even think about it!"
I prevented him from saying anything more. That's when I heard stomping. My head slightly perked up, looking out the window. There was a group. It was the biggest group I had ever seen. Imagine the amount of Junkets, which is all of the seniors at Windvale Learning, and imagine that multiplied 10 times.
The people were holding up signs, and they were all different ages. Most of them were Junkets, though. The signs read "BURN THE AUBURN!" And that's what they were chanting. Rulio was in the gravest danger he could possibly be in.
The mayor of Windvale, Mayor Davis, cleared his throat. He was stout, and he had gray hair that sprouted everywhere, and he had a beard that went down to his knees.
Mayor Davis clapped his hands together. "Everyone, quiet! It has come to my attention that Rulio Scherer, the man with auburn eyes, has been on a killing spree for anyone with brown eyes. We will do our best to get rid of him and make pea-"
I heard a chuckle, and then an "Excuse me." Kurt Churchwill walked forward. Part of the green dye in his hair was fading, revealing subtle strands of blonde. Mayor Davis groaned. "Kurt, what do you want?"
Kurt crossed his arms. "I don't actually want anything. Well...that's incorrect. I *want* to tell these beautiful people something." The mayor put his hands on his hips. "Spit it out." Kurt smirked. "Rulio Scherer is dead. I killed him."
Everyone's jaw immediately dropped. Darb and I looked at each other. Mayor Davis scoffed. "Oh, yeah? Show me your proof, and you'll get your money."
Kurt handed the mayor a photo of Rulio's dead body. Our car was right behind the mayor, so I took a good look at it. For some reason, it looked very fake. Like Rulio wasn't actually dead. Darb pointed at it. "There's no way that's real."

The mayor shrugged. "Looks real enough to me. Kurt, I will give you the money prize tomorrow. Let's throw a party! I'll ask Mrs. Wallas to make the Pub n' Club of Granny Urchin's really come out tonight."

Kurt pointed at Mayor Davis. "You're the man, buddy. Thank you very much." Everyone groaned. They had moved to Windvale for absolutely nothing. They all retreated back to their homes.

When everyone was cleared out, Darb turned around. "So, we can all agree that was the fakest corpse photo we've ever seen, right?" Everyone nodded in unison. I stood up. "Come on. We're going inside Granny Urchin's, and we're getting answers out of Kurt."

Lights lit up inside the diner. I went inside and walked up to Kurt. When he saw me, he smirked. "Oh, hey. It's *you* again. Who are those people with you? Your family?"

Darb adjusted his hat. "Well, actually-" I cut him off. "Yes! This is my family." Kurt scoffed. "Dang it. I really wanted it to be your pals so I could beat them up. But I'm not damaging the Hampton *family* tonight."

I crossed my arms. "Kurt, can you explain the photo?" He glared at me. "I killed Rulio. Shot him down. Fair is fair, isn't it?" I replied, "Well, can you explain why it looked so fake?"

Kurt scrunched his eyebrows nervously. "What do you mean? It's literally the real photo." I smiled. "Oh, yeah? Well, then, show it to me." He reluctantly took it out. I analysed it. "Ah ha! Right there: A tiny hint of leg movement. I knew *something* looked blurry."

Sweat started dripping down on him. "What?! You're incorrect! Rulio is dead, for the last time!" Darb's head poked out from behind me. "Buddy, you can stop stalling. We already know you faked it."

Kurt groaned. "Okay. Fine. You caught me. I didn't actually kill the guy." I chuckled. "Then why did you lie?" The senior ran a hand through his hair. "A few days ago, I walked up to him and tried to beat him up, but he stopped me. For a moment, I thought he was going to kill me instead, but then he let me go. He told me to pretend he's dead so people would stop constantly hunting him down because he let me go, and I agreed. Money is money, after all."

I scoffed. "How is *that* fair? You literally faked it just so you could have the cash? What sort of greedy person are you?" All of a sudden, Ocean yelled, "THIS GUY'S A LIAR! HE SAID HE KILLED RULIO, BUT HE'S WRONG!"

Darb muttered to me, "Ticks, Ocean is cooking with her three sentences per week."

Kurt put on his nervous face again. "What?! No! People, people, they're the ones lying over here. I can assure you that I killed Rulio!"

Viv scoffed. "Then explain this leg movement right here!" She held up the photo and pointed at Rulio's leg. The sweat on Kurt's face continued to stream down. "Everybody, you're hallucinating! There is no leg movement happening at all!"

Mayor Davis crossed his arms. "That's not what I saw, Kurt. You really claimed you killed Rulio? Just so you could have that money? What sort of psycho are you?"
Kurt raised his palms up. "Listen, I can explain here-" The mayor shook his head, and then took out a walkie talkie. "Hello, I'm trying to contact the Windvale Police Department? Yeah, this guy over here pretended that he killed Rulio Scherer. Um…green hair, brown eyes, gym bod…"
The police immediately came and took Kurt away. He grunted at us. "YOU (the rest of his sentence has been censored by Darb)!"
Mayor Davis walked up to me. "Thank you for busting that loser good. I have never trusted Kurt. I should've known there was something off about him yet again."
Mrs. Wallas, from the corner, grunted. "I WANTED TO TAKE A BREAK FROM MY FREAKING JOB AND CELEBRATE SOMETHING FOR ONCE!"
The people at the party immediately started talking to each other about where Rulio might be now. The Junkets were *really* into whatever plan they were making. They must have been really disappointed when they heard Kurt already "killed" Rulio.
Jacque, the janitor, ran onto the stage. "Do you want something to celebrate? Celebrate that it's the exact date I started working here two years ago!"
Everyone hesitated for a second, confused, and then shrugged it off and got back into a good mood again. The DJ was blasting Fizz n Whiz, which got Mrs. Wallas all over the dance floor. I mean, you can never go wrong with the Showbiz Sibs. All of their songs are just pure bangers through and through. My personal favorite is their introduction rap. It's just a classic.
Chef Robin walked over to me. "Jay Man! What are you doing here?" I shushed him. "I'm not supposed to be here. I'm undercover. Don't say anything to Mrs. Wallas!" The chef's eyes lit up. "You're in disguise?! I've been waiting for this moment for this entire party!" My eyebrows raised up. "Chef Robin, please don-"
But it was too late. He ran up to the stage, grabbed the mic, and cleared his throat. "Presenting…Granny Urchin's official band…TROSH!" He pointed at me, Darb, Viv, and Ocean.
Darb scoffed. "You guys have an official band? Ticks, you should've told me! I am a guitar *master*." I nodded. "Great. We're really gonna need you."
The four of us nervously walked up to stage, still in our undercover outfits. Chef Robin smiled. "The members are named Namyaj, Brad, Viv, and Naeco!" I shushed him again. I nervously held the mic.
Darb grabbed the guitar and started strumming. Ocean added some keyboards. I wanted to clear my throat, but that would be really loud, so I tried to come up with lyrics:
"Welcome to the party…the never ending party…a time for celebration…" The audience booed. I heard someone scoff and mutter, "This Trosh band is really Trosh indeed."

I sighed in the mic. “Everyone, stop the music! The truth is…we’re a cover band. We’re not ones for original music, as you could probably tell. Uh…Brad, what songs do you know?!” Darb smiled. “Hey Jude by the Beatles.” I sighed with relief. “Thank goodness it’s a good song.”
He started strumming, and I started singing, and then burst out laughing. “Oh, please! Let’s just skip to the fun part that EVERYBODY ACTUALLY KNOWS! Na, na, na…”
We sang the last part of Hey Jude, which really riled up the crowd. We sang that part for over 20 minutes. And surprisingly, Mrs. Wallas didn’t mind one bit. It turns out she has a soft spot for when it comes to music.
When the time was up and my throat felt dryer than a desert, I threw a peace sign to the crowd. “Thank you, Windvale!” The guy from before muttered, “You know, maybe I was proven wrong. I LOVE YOU, TROSH!” People started throwing bucketloads of cash at us. Darb shuffled it around, and whispered to me: “If we don’t kill Rulio, I think this will chip in for quite a few things instead.”
The four of us walked backstage and took the secret exit out of Granny Urchin’s before any other drama could unravel in there. Jacque was outside, sorting towels. The four of us each grabbed one and threw them over us so no one would recognize us as Trosh.
We hopped into Darb’s car. He clicked his seatbelt. “Next stop is wherever the next chunk of Junkets are being held hostage. Thanks to Ocean, we are able to track where they might be. And I promise I won’t speed it up this time.”
We drove off.

Chapter Ten

Chapter Ten - Creste

I woke up the next day around 4 PM, thanks to my bad habit of sleeping in way late, and Rulio was waiting for me. “Come on, Lackey. I’ve got a deal to settle with Kurt.”
I scrunched my eyebrows. “I thought we made a decision to never interfere with that guy again?” He chuckled. “That’s very reasonable, but I need him to do something for me real quick.”
He led me towards the middle of the forest, where Kurt was talking with some other Junkets. Rulio cleared his throat, and Kurt looked over. “Oh, hey. What do you want *now?* Would you like to book an appointment for Kurt Churchwill beating you up at…five seconds from now?”
Rulio twisted his cane around. “No, actually. I need you to do something important. There are many people out there threatening to kill me, holding up signs saying BURN THE AUBURN! Well, I’ve had just about enough of that. You, Kurt, are gonna tell the mayor that you killed me.”
He burst out laughing. “WHAT?! That’s crazy, junior! You seriously think that I would do *you* a favor?! I think you became the old man from the ‘it’s raining it’s pouring’ song: You bumped your head a bit too hard.”
Rulio bit his bottom lip. “Kurt, you seem to think I’m insane. Which is true. But think of all that cash you will soak your hands in if you fib to the mayor.” Kurt nodded slowly. “Yeah…oh baby…I can just picture those five hundred dollars fitting right inside my fist bank…okay, fine! You sold me! You’ve got a deal. But if I’m telling the mayor that, I’m gonna need some proof.”
Rulio grabbed a packet of ketchup from his pocket and sprayed it on his shirt, then he laid down, his raven head cane to the side, playing dead. I moved to a different angle and took a picture with the Polaroid. The picture came out crisp and clear.
It looked convincing, but there was one small problem: Rulio’s leg was slightly twitching. I shook my head. “This is *not* good.” Kurt scoffed. “How? You think the 70 year old mayor is going to notice the world’s most minor detail? Not even *I* can see what you’re talking about.”
Rulio took a look at the photo. “Hmm, I seem to notice that technical error right there. But don’t worry, Kurt. No one should point that out anytime soon. You’ve got this, buddy. Go knock them dead! Not me, of course.”

Kurt nodded quickly, and then ran off. The other Junkets followed. Once they were completely out of sight, Rulio sighed. “I really hope he doesn’t get all stupid again and tell someone it’s fake.”

I adjusted myself. “What do you think your friend Jayman is doing right now?” His eyes filled with anger at the mention of his name. “He’s not my friend. We’re not close. I listened in on what he was doing at Granny Urchin’s. He’s met someone new, and he’s planning to kill me. The worst part is that his new best friend has brown eyes. But they can’t kill us if we don’t kill them first.”

I scrunched my eyebrows. “Are you saying…” Rulio nodded. “Today’s the last day of killing Junkets. Tomorrow, I’m gonna find a way to capture the brown eyed loser and then later that day, we will fight. Hopefully we won’t die.”

I held onto his arm. “You know, Scherer…you’ve been my first real friend.” He stared out into the distance, and then nodded after a moment. “I’ve had a few…acquaintances…over the years. But none of them mattered except for you.”

I grabbed tighter, and we continued to look out together, but then Rulio found out who he really was, and then wiped the faint smile that I thought I saw for a split second off his face. “Right. Killing some more Junkets. Come on, Lackey! We must not waste time now!”

He sent me out to find some with brown eyes. I noticed a group of three of them in Granny Urchin’s, partying. Kudos to my pickpocketing skills from the past, I was able to have them slip through a giant air vent.

I put them inside the net and gagged them. They were in disguise as a garbage bag. I went inside the shack and put them on the table.

I removed the gags and the garbage cover, along with the net completely. The Junkets grunted, trying to get out of the shack. Rulio chuckled. “Ah, it seems you guys were picked last to experience something. As they say: Save the best for last. So, tell me, why was there a party inside Granny Urchin’s?”

The Junket facing Rulio widened her eyes. “What in the- Kurt said you were dead! He killed you!”

Rulio analysed his hand. “Don’t believe everything you see, sweetheart. Especially not with *those* brown eyes. Did someone think your eyes were a toilet and…poop in it? Such bad manners indeed.”

One of the Junkets in the shack scoffed. “At least your buddy captured us in the middle of Trosh’s song. They didn’t lie about their band name: They are genuinely Trosh indeed.”
Rulio tapped his cane. “Ravens. Such a nice bird species. Very iconic when it comes to the flying things in the sky. You can see them just about anywhere you want. Tell me, when’s the last time *you’ve* seen a raven?”
The third Junket smiled. “Yesterday, actually!” The first Junket grabbed the third by her collar. “Don’t really tell this insane psycho, doofus!”
Rulio shook his head. “No, no, no! It’s okay, it’s okay. Did you know that ravens are omnivores? They love to eat insects, lizards, and more! Can someone name another main food for ravens?”
The second Junket nodded. “Small mammals.” The first Junket groaned. “Why am I friends with a bunch of idiots?!” Rulio sighed. “Please. Lady. Don’t try to kill the mood for them. Raven trivia is fun and educational!”
He squinted his eyes. “I must say…you guys are a lot shorter in real life. Funny. I expected the Junkets to be this really scary gang, but outside of maybe Kurt, you guys are dorks. In fact, I can consider you small mammals.”
The first Junket scoffed. “Oh, please. A raven isn’t gonna feast on our hearts. They’re probably more scared of us than we are of them.” Rulio shrugged. “Really?” He showed them the cane. “I think *this* says otherwise.”
Rulio raised up the raven’s head and stabbed the beak into all three of their hearts. “Lackey, you know what to do.” I nodded. I put the corpses into the garbage net and threw them out into the woods.
He faintly smiled. “Good work yet again, Lackey. Now, please get prepared. And by that, I mean conserve all of your energy. We’re gonna need to be ready to fight against Jayman and the others.”
I put my hands behind my back. “I’m afraid of something.” Rulio’s evil expression went away. “Wha-what is it?” I looked down. “I’m afraid I’m gonna lose you, Scherer.”
He sighed and gave me a hug. “Come here, Lackey. I know this might be tough to handle, but if I die…you can still visit my grave often. My favorite flower is daisies.”

My eyes filled up with tears. “I don’t want you to go…” Rulio swallowed. “I promise that I will fight my hardest for you. If you’ve got anything you want to say to me, you might as well say it now.”
I wanted to tell him. I wanted to tell him that…I loved him. But I couldn’t. I was worried he would react negatively and not want to be friends with me anymore.
I sighed. “I- I…really have to go to the bathroom.” His hands immediately came off me. “Well, then get through with it. You don’t want a hug while being stinky, do you?”
I walked out of the shack, sat down, and leaned against the walls. I don’t know why I didn’t just tell him right there. Why was I being so dumb? Is this how I usually am around Rulio?
That’s when I heard his voice: “Lackey, hurry up with whatever you’re doing and come back to the shack!” There was no way he loved me back, right? Because there was a hint of attitude in his voice just now.
I slowly went into the shack. Rulio smirked. “Kurt should be coming back in a few seconds. And I’ve got something planned for him.”
Out of nowhere, a bunch of people kicked down the door and threw Kurt on the ground. The one with glasses pointed at him. “This guy’s a liar! He said he killed Rulio for the money, but he was incorrect!”
The one without glasses crossed his arms. “Yeah! And the lead singer of Trosh himself even confirmed that Kurt was lying to us all! Do something about this!”
Rulio tapped his cane. “Wow. And I really thought you were going to keep that promise. You really blew your shot with the 500 dollars there, Kurt. What punishment should I give you?”
Kurt had a genuine scared expression on his face. “Please! Please! Spare me mercy! The guy was pegging at me because he saw me give the photo to the mayor! I had no choice but to tell him he was right!”
Rulio crossed his arms. “You know, there’s something called *ignoring*. It may not be your *en haut,* but that’s what it is for me. Although, after what you did, I don’t know if ignoring you is going to be useful right now.”
Kurt chuckled. “Look, it was an honest mistake. The guy was really strict about it.”

Rulio smirked. “Oh, yeah? And who was this guy?” Kurt shrugged. “He didn’t look familiar, but his voice sounded like a junior I once knew…” Rulio put the cane to Kurt’s throat. “Who. Was. It. Who made you spill the deets I told you to keep inside because they wanted to kill me so bad?”
Kurt scratched his head. “Well, he kind of sounded like that one Jayman kid. Does that name ring a bell for you?” Rulio’s eyes widened for a second, and then hardened with fury. “Thank you, Kurt. Oh! By the way: I know what your consequence should be.”
The Junket sighed with relief. “Alright. What puny little punishment do you have for me? Is it the good old time out chair? My mother sure loved to send me to that thing when I was young.”
Rulio pulled up a chair. “Sit right here, please.” Kurt burst out laughing. “I can’t believe it! I was right! Oh, the bad and painful memories I get from this! I know it’s not supposed to be funny, but now I’m thinking otherwise!”
Rulio nodded. “Don’t worry. You won’t be sitting there for much longer. I forgive you for what you did. And I hope to make your punishment *lightning* quick.”
He raised up his cane and smashed it against the lightbulb sitting above Kurt. Kurt looked up, nervous. “Oh, no…GAAAAAAAH!” The Junket got electrocuted, and fell on the ground, dead.
The people behind him dropped their jaws. Rulio took them by the collars. “Thank you. I really appreciate you folks. Now go and live your lives normally. Do not tell anyone about what happened to Kurt.” The two of them quickly nodded and ran out of the shack.
There were tons of people out there, yelling at the people that were just in the shack, demanding the truth about what happened in there. When the people refused, the Junkets started chanting:
“WE WANT KURT! BURN THE AUBURN! WE WANT KURT! BURN THE AUBURN!”
One of the people sighed and shushed them. “OKAY! Okay…the thing is…Kurt is dead. He got electrocuted by the auburn.”
Rulio grunted. “When I get my cane on those untrustworthy scums…” The Junkets kept yelling at the two people, which ended up running into the shack. When they saw Rulio, they slowly backed up against the locked door.

Rulio loomed over them. “So…I heard some stuff out there. You really broke your promise? Truly unbelievable. I thought you guys were terrified of me. Well, guess what? We’re going to double that fear.”
He took the beak of the raven’s head and drove it into their hearts. Rulio wickedly grinned. “You punks deserved it.” I tapped my fingers together. “Um…Scherer…isn’t that enough killing for today?”
He turned to me. “I know. But they have all broken the promises they swore they would keep. Tomorrow, I will capture the brown eyed friend of Jayman’s, and then I will kill every last one of them.”
I smiled slightly. “As long as we don’t die.” Rulio put a hand on my shoulder. “We will do our best. That is a promise that we will keep, unlike the others.”

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Eleven - Jayman

We walked around the forest. Darb pointed in front of him. “Over there! I see a group of at least three people that look like Junkets.”
The people were clinking cans of beer and laughing. They were definitely Junkets. I walked up to them. “Hello, um…gang. What’s up?”
The Junket with blonde hair looked at me, confused. “Aren’t you that tiny junior Kurt likes to beat up?” I sighed. “Yes. But that’s not the point here. We want to help you. What are you doing out here in the woods?”
The brunette Junket took a sip of beer. “Hiding. From that Rulio guy. Apparently, whenever he sees Junkets out in public, he kidnaps them and kills them. We don’t want that. What are *you* doing? That’s the real question.”
I groaned. “For the second time, we’re here to help you. We don’t like Rulio, either. In fact, we’re trying to kill him.” The ginger Junket burst out laughing. “Good luck with that. His cane will off you immediately.”
I smirked. “Ah. I see. But what power does he have without his cane? Other than that, all he’s got is his hands. And Kurt’s hands were able to wipe him out immediately. Together, we can steal Rulio’s cane!”
Brunette Junket scrunched his eyebrows. “I don’t think you understand. We don’t affiliate with juniors like you.” I shrugged. “Okay. How about this: If one of us kills him, we split the money. You get 250 bucks, and *we* also get 250 bucks. Is that a deal?”
Brunette Junket was about to object, but then Blonde Junket stopped him and whispered in his ear, “Think of the money. All of that glorious cash just for you…” Brunette Junket put his hands on his hips. “Fine. My name is Wen. The blonde is Nelia, and the ginger is Frank. I can’t wait to let Kurt know about this.”
That’s when I heard someone shout: “KURT IS DEAD! HE GOT ELECTROCUTED BY RULIO!” The three Junkets dropped their jaws. I was never a big fan of Kurt, but it was still hard to wrap my head around the fact that he was officially dead.
Wen turned to me, grumpy. “In Kurt’s honor, after we defeat Rulio, I will beat you up.” I shrugged. “Sure. Whatever you say.”
Frank threw his empty beer can on the ground. “Alright. Let’s make a plan so Rulio doesn’t capture us.” Ocean smiled and gave me a paper with a full route on it. I looked at her with genuine concern. “How in Windvale are you able to make this so quick? This plan is genius!”
Nelia snatched it out of my hands. “Let *us* see.”

She held it up, and then cleared her throat. "Okay, here's how it will go: We go in disguise as grandparents, knock on Rulio's door and offer him cookies that we will say are freshly baked, and someone will slip the cane out of his cane while we do it. Wow! This is actually an impressive plan!"

Darb nodded. "It sounds good, but how will we go undercover as old people?" I tapped my chin. "I happen to know a couple of places…"

We went inside Darb's car, and the three Junkets hid underneath the car hood. I drove the car to a face paint shop.

The guy working there was sleeping. Wen pounded the counter. "Hey! We would like some face paint, please." He put his hands on his hips. "Alright. That's gonna cost 19 bucks for all of you, though." Viv handed him the cash. The guy smirked at the money. "Ooh, a 20 instead. Go to the other room."

A cheerful woman was waiting for us. "Hello! What would you like painted? We've got tigers, cheetahs, and more!" Frank crossed his arms. "Give us tons of wrinkles. Make us look 100, please."

The woman scrunched her eyebrows. "Okay…? Whatever floats your boat, I guess. Please sit somewhere."

After around 30 minutes, she painted our faces. "Thank you! Please come again soon!" When we were out of the face paint shop, Darb looked at me. "Where's the next place?" I smiled. "Right across the street is a G.I. Generation owned shop for clothes and wigs that fit their aesthetic well."

I led them to it, and there was an old man inside, knitting a sweater. "Hello! What would you like? Perhaps a hat?" I shook my head. "Four male outfits and three female outfits, please," I said in an old, gruff voice.

He gave us outfits that look like they came straight from 1901. Definitely not the 1971 vibe of today, that's for sure. We put them on, and Darb walked up to the old man. "Can you give us wigs, please? Gray hair will do nicely."

The old man gave us the wigs, which we put on. We looked inside the mirror. We looked like a bunch of raisins. I smiled. "Next stop is the bakery."

We walked to the bakery, and I asked specifically for freshly baked cookies. They gave us chocolate chip ones, which were perfect. That was always Rulio's favorite. It would be hard for him to resist.

I led them to his shack, and Nelia knocked on the door. Rulio reluctantly creaked it open. Nelia smiled brightly. "Hello there! Would you like some freshly baked chocolate chip cookies? I made them for my grandson's birthday, but he forgot to tell me that he was out of town for it!

So, I'm handing some out. I can assure you they were made with all of the love and care in the world."
Rulio peeked out, showing us his auburn eyes. He thought for a moment, and then nodded. "Thanks. I love cookies." Darb, on cue, fell to the ground. "Ouch! Ooh, I think I busted my knee again. Hopefully I don't need yet another knee replacement. I've already had FOUR of those! Isn't that right, Martha?"
Rulio's full body stepped out, raven's head cane in hand. "Oh. Do you always have trouble walking?" Darb chuckled. "Oh, yeah. This is very common for me. Happens daily." Rulio held out his cane. "Here. Take this cane. Use it wisely. It's been through a lot."
Darb smiled. He was obviously trying to hold his snarky laughter in. "Aw, thanks, sonny! You're a real one. You know that, right?" Rulio nodded, and then shut his door. We all silently cheered. Our objective was complete.
We all hid inside my house. I haven't been inside that thing for what felt like forever. Wen crossed his arms. "You know, junior. You're not so helpless once we get to know you." Frank smiled. "Yeah. You're really cool, dude."
Ocean made dinner for us. It was a hamburger with fries. Can't get much better than that. Nelia crunched on a fry. "So…how did you get into this scenario?" I crossed my arms. "Well, I was actually best friends with Rulio for the longest time. Then he stabbed out Rulio's right eye, which caused drama to unfold, making him the most wanted person right now. And Darb over here happened to be planning to kill him right when I ran away from him. So, we are hunting for Rulio. We're gonna kill him, and we're gonna get that money fair and square."
Frank chuckled. "After this, we should take you to Eoby's Bar, right by Granny Urchin's. That's where all of the leftover Junkets are hiding. If you can get information from them, then you will know everything about how to kill Rulio the right way."
We finished our burgers, washed off our old people disguise, and then we followed them to Eoby's Bar, which had opened 8 days ago. There were a couple of employees standing outside. One of them stared at us. "What are you doing here?"
Wen crossed his arms. "They're with us. They can get the specialty non alcoholic beverages." The guard shrugged. "Sure. Welcome to Eoby's Bar. No smoking, please."
The leftover Junkets were sitting at a round table, sipping drinks. Compared to how many there used to be, there were practically none at the table. 10 at most. They were plotting something.
One of them had a stern expression on his face and looked up at me. "Who are you and what are you doing with Wen, Frank, and Nelia?" I put my hands on my hips. "My name is Jayman Hampton, and we joined forces in defeating Rulio. Tell us: What do you know? About the best way to kill him, I mean?"

One of them put a net on the table. Inside was a dead ginger man. "In here is the dead body of Jert. As you can see, he was stabbed in the heart."
I squinted my eyes. "The hole right there looks beak shaped. That must've come from the cane. It's a really good thing we stole it. Do you have any corpses of your buddies?" Another one nodded. "They're underneath the table."
I looked down. A ton of bodies were there, all piled on top of each other. They all had one thing in common: They were all stabbed in the heart. I smiled. "I've noticed two things: Number one - Rulio sure loves his cane. Number two - It seems his most powerful body part is his hands, more specifically, his fingers."
The Junket sitting at the end chuckled. "Go ahead. Stab him in the knuckles. See what that will do." I tapped my chin. "That's actually not a bad idea. Can someone write that down?" Ocean smiled. "I've already got a notepad in hand, Jayman." I nodded. "Right. Perfect."
The Junket in the middle crossed her arms. "You know, you guys aren't as juvenile as Kurt said you are. As you know, we're the Junkets. What's the name of your little…what do I call it…cult?"
Darb burst out laughing. "Don't worry. I've invented the best name for us ages ago. Call us the Snarkies. It's just the right personality fit." Wen nodded. "Indeed."
The Junket in the middle smirked. "Nice. From this day forward: There will be no more quarrels between the Junkets and the Snarkies until after Rulio's dead. We will join forces in killing him. Let's shake on it." She shook my hand. It was an official deal now.
The seven of us went back to my house. It was basically 10 PM now. Frank smiled at me. "Good night, Jayman." And so, we all went to bed. (Ocean had already put out sleeping bags for the rest of us. Her IQ is probably higher than all of us combined.)
The next morning, I woke up and put some waffles in the toaster. Darb, Viv, and Ocean followed down. Darb adjusted his hat. "Today's the day where we find Rulio and end him. I must say, Jayman, we've come a long way."
I nodded. "Yeah. Wait, hold up, did you just call me by my actual name?" He smiled. "I thought you deserved that title after what you did for us by siding with the Junkets. Although Jay Man isn't done yet."
When I finished eating my homemade breakfast, I went back to my room. I heard talking outside of my room. It was Viv and Ocean. I must say: I have *never* heard Ocean speak this much.
Ocean was giving advice to Viv about something. I don't know what exactly it was, but hearing Ocean give an actual speech is like finding a needle in a haystack, folks.
When they finished, Viv knocked on my door. I scrunched my eyebrows. "Come in?" She slowly walked in.

"Hey, Jayman…" I nodded. "Hi. What's up? Another foot injury?" She smiled slightly. "No. Something else." I shrugged. "Okay. Spill it."
Viv tapped her fingers together. "Well…we've hung out a lot in the past five days. It's really fun getting to know you." I nodded again. "Yeah, yeah. Isn't it so enthralling to learn about someone that lives in Windvale. Anyways, go on."
Her lip quivered. "And…this is very hard to get out of my gut, but…I like you. A lot." My eyes widened for a second, and then went back to normal. I chuckled for a second. "By gosh, I was *waiting* for you to say something."
Viv scrunched her eyebrows. "Wait, what?" I smiled. "Sunshine, I already knew you liked me. Literally every time I talked to you in the cabin, I noticed you blushing. Quite the charmer, aren't I?" She looked down at the bed. "I was…blushing? As in, like, my cheeks turned pink?"
I put a hand on her shoulder. "Yes! And don't worry: You're doing it right now, too. But I don't hate it. In fact, it makes me happy seeing that someone genuinely cares for me more than anything."
Viv slowly looked back up. "So…do you like me, too?" I rested my eyes and kept a slight smile on my face. "You're great, but I need to think about it for a day or two. Can't have the plane taking off too early, as you know. The passengers need to board first."
She grabbed her arm. "Okay. But please report back to me before we all die." I nodded. "Got it. And hey, I'll fight just a tad more for you, alright? Thanks for confessing, Viv."
I walked out of my room and back downstairs. "So, who's ready to go rendezvous with Rulio and beat him up more than ever?" All of a sudden, Darb yelled, "THE JUNKETS! THEY'RE MISSING!"
Viv, Ocean, and I ran over to him. "How did they disappear?" Darb turned to face us. "I was talking with them, and then out of nowhere, a piece of rope came and bound them together. The next thing I knew: They slipped through the air vent and vanished!"
My eyes turned dark. "Rulio. He must've done this. That explains everything." Darb scrunched his eyebrows. "How do you know it was Rulio?" I looked at him with genuine concern. "Who else is possibly hunting down Junkets and taking them away like how you described?" He pressed his lips together. "You make a valid point."
I grabbed his arm. "Come on. We're going to Rulio's shack and listening in on what's happening to them." The four of us ran out and put our ears to Rulio's door.
He was talking to them. "Finally! You're the last Junkets left, you know. The rest were slaughtered overnight. Rest in peace to them. So, how do you feel knowing that after I kill you, no other Junkets will be left?"
They all screamed in unison. Rulio laughed evilly. "Oh, that is one beautiful sound. I'm still deciding how it should be done. Should it be the classic bullet? Or perhaps something else?

Actually! I've got a different idea. The other day, a group of old people gave me these cookies. Try one. They're reportedly delicious."

Wen whispered to the others, "Don't do it! I already know it's poison!" Rulio sighed. "You guys are good at this game. Fine! I admit I sprinkled a little something in there."

Frank grunted. "Let us free! There's a group of really smart people out there that are planning to kill you later!" Rulio chuckled. "Oh, I know. It's the good old Jayman and Company. So, how do we feel about a knife to the throat?"

They all started arguing. Darb adjusted his hat. "Will this ever end?" They all went silent at the sound of his voice. Darb's smile dropped. "Ticks." And then, out of nowhere, a net came, tangling him up and sending him away.

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Twelve - Darb

The sound of wind blowing.
The sound is gone.
The feel of someone's hands on me.
The feel is gone.
The sound of a cane dropping to the ground.
The sound is gone.
The sound of Rulio saying, "Ha! We've got him now, Lackey."
The sound is gone.
The sight of Rulio and his right hand man standing by him.
The sight stays.
I grunted. "Where…where am I?" Rulio brushed his hands together. "Look up, *Darb.*" I did what he said. I was inside a white tube, and my hands were attached to chains at the top. The same went for my feet. "What…what are you trying to do to me? I am not a lab experiment!"
Rulio picked up his cane and tapped it. "No! That is a huge misunderstanding! We're not using you for science! We're using you for *information.* We're on a field trip, and we need a tour guide. Luckily, we were able to find one."
I burst out laughing. "Oh, ticks. I don't think your head was set straight. I am no chaperone. I'm just a guy." Rulio leaned against the tube. "Maybe. But little do you know that your importance is much higher than you think. Now, tell me, what is your relationship with Jayman?"
I smiled. "He's my best friend. I met him six days ago. He's on my team called the Snarkies. We are totally awesome!" Rulio put his cane against the tube. "You…are *friends…WITH JAYMAN?!"* I shrugged. "Yeah. He's a pretty nice guy, if you ask me."
Rulio's eyes widened, and his teeth clenched. "NICE?! What ounce of him is nice?! He's a lazy, grumpy loser that made a plan to kill me!"
I sighed. "Listen up. He was nice to me. And guess what? He was nice to you, too! If you're gonna put the blame on anyone, it should be Kurt."
Rulio grunted. "That guy's already dead. Electrocuted him cleanly, if I do say so myself."

My nostrils flared. “That’s not the point. The point is that you should let me out of here or I will do something everyone finds annoying.”
He twisted his cane around. “Ooh. I would normally let you free, but for starters: I need you for something incredible. Also, you’re already doing something everyone finds annoying: speaking.”
My eyes filled with hatred. “If you think *that’s* bad enough, I can start ranting about some nonsense no one would care about.” Rulio chuckled. “You’re already doing that. I don’t need any more.” I smiled. “Okay, then! Let me out!” He glared. *“Never.”* I shrugged. “Alright. But here’s a warning: You asked for it.”
“Have you ever heard of this wonderful drink called Dr. Pepper? Don’t worry, it’s not beer. In fact, it’s a type of soda with caffeine in it! If you don’t know what that is, it’s basically something that will make you feel energetic! And if you get Diet Dr. Pepper, there’s no sugar in it at all! It just has this amazing taste and kickstart energy that just really puts you in a good mood. And if you even *think* about trying to borrow my Dr. Pepper, then you must be really stupid. When was Dr. Pepper invented, you might ask? The year 1885. I know, I know. It was made forever ago. In my opinion, it’s an oldie but a goodie! A greatie, to be even more specific. After this, *you* should go try some Dr. Pepper. Who knows? The doctor might fuel your current ‘pepper-y’ mood. I highly recommend it!”
Rulio glared at me. “If you don’t shut up…” I burst out laughing. “There is no ticking way you just said that! Look, dude. You’re cool, but I am *Darb Roberts*. Shutting up? Not exactly something I’m talented at. That won’t be my expertise.”
He held the cane up. “I don’t care what your freaking name is! I’m just here to compliment your *wonderful* eye color.” I smiled. “Aw, thanks! Although, it’s pretty common. I feel like you can easily spot people with brown eyes…wait. Isn’t that the eye color you have a massive grudge against?”
Rulio chuckled. “You just now realized that? Precisely! I’m here to kill you, but I want to give you the slow burn. I’m currently trying to comprehend how in Windvale you and Jayman, the absolute grump, became best friends.”
I shrugged. “Oh, I don’t know! Maybe it’s because I’m not a mass murderer? Or maybe it’s because people know me for being snarky? Maybe it’s because underneath all of this professional yapper, there’s a sweet and sensitive guy? Maybe it’s because I have enough charisma to side with Junkets? Maybe it’s because my father was once an awesome ringleader at a circus? Ticks, there’s lots of good traits about me!”

Rulio smirked. “Oh, yeah? What blood type are you?” I shrugged. “Uh…” I noticed the others in a small window behind Rulio. They were with Wen, Nelia, and Frank. They were trying to secretly break through. “...I don’t know, Rulio.”

He tapped his cane. “Well, I certainly can’t wait to find out in just a few minutes.” Rulio’s partner tapped his shoulder. “Excuse me, Scherer. Do you promise this will be the last guy we kill?” He sighed. “Don’t forget about Jayman and his other friends, too.” She nodded. “Yeah. Them as well.”

I raised my eyebrows. “It seems that you guys really enjoy killing people. I don’t see the vision, personally. Is it a hobby? A guilty pleasure for when you’re bored out of your mind? You know, I understand a lot of things in life. But *that?!* That is certainly not one of them.”

Rulio rubbed a finger on the side of his head. “It’s times like these I wish I had brought tape beforehand. Lackey, please go fetch them.” She nodded. “Yes, Scherer.”

I leaned back in the tube. I noticed the others had silently unscrewed all the nails holding up the window. Wen slowly took it off. Viv held a rope down, and Jayman slowly crawled in. The craziest part was that no one said a single word throughout all of this.

Rulio crossed his arms. “Alright. It’s about time for dinner. This might sound strange, but we really need you to stay healthy. Your heart’s gotta be in perfect condition if we’re gonna be killing you. Have some strictly heart healthy chips. They will do nicely.”

While I snacked on the food he gave me, I overheard him and his assistant chatting.

R: Hey, Lackey. You don’t look so fantastic. Is everything alright?

A: I just don’t wanna kill any more people.

R: Would you rather have one of us dead? You said yourself that…

A: That I was afraid of losing you.

R: Correct.

A: Yeah, I know. That was only two days ago.

R: Remember when I said I would fight extra hard for you?

A: Yeah, why?

R: Well…killing is battling very hard, if you ask me.

A: So…you would kill for me?

R: Any time. Especially when it’s one of these punks. Specifically that Darb fellow.

A: Why? Is he getting on your nerves?

R: That and he’s Jayman’s new brown eyed best friend.

A: Don’t worry…I’ll be your best friend.

R: Not just a partner in crime?
A: No…just best friends…
R: Hey! You're a great friend. I wouldn't trade you for anything.
A: Not even for a different shade of eye color?
R: Why? Do you hate them?
A: Not at all! In fact, I think auburn suits you very well.
R: And why's that? Is it because I'm mentally insane just like the myths say?
A: No. It just compliments your golden hair and cheekbones really well.
R: I was actually really insecure about that for my entire life. I still am. I never thought I would hear someone say those parts of my body actually look good.
A: Well, I don't know what in Windvale you're insecure about. I think it looks beautiful.
R: Actually? Or are you just saying that to make me feel better?
A: No, Rulio. I'm genuinely speaking from the heart.
R: Did you forget what my last name was?
A: No. I just think your first name sounds pretty.
R: I guess it has a good ring to it. If someone said "Rulio", the other person would immediately know I was the subject.
A: It stands out. Not everyone likes that name right now, but that's what always rings a bell in a good way for me.
R: Well, I'm glad that you think that.
A: Scherer, I…
R: Yes? What have you got to roll of your tongue now?
A: I…can't wait to slaughter Jayman and his friends!
R: Yeah! That's the spirit, Lackey! You better be prepared, because I know I am. In fact, I'm gonna check on Darb. Thanks for reminding me, Lackey!
It was oddly interesting to listen to. I know that we're supposed to hate Rulio, but it's hard to kill him now knowing that his best friend wants to be somebody to him. And by that, I mean loving him.
He walked out of the other room and towards me. "So…how are your chips? Did they satisfy you?" I nodded. "They sure indulged my heart."
Rulio smiled evilly. "Good. Now if you'll excuse us, we are just about ready to have you killed in a few minutes."

I shrugged. “Okay.” He questioned my casualness, but little did he know that Jayman and the others were trying to get me out of here.

Rulio and Lackey were standing together by a table. Rulio slowly pulled out his cane. And, with a sudden jolt, he held the beak of the raven’s head up to my throat.

His grin spread even more. “Have you got anything left to say, Darb?” I nodded. “Your hair looks great. Also, you might wanna look behind you, buddy.”

Rulio looked behind me, visibly confused. Jayman and the others were standing there in fighting positions. Rulio lunged at them.

While he was trying to choke Jayman with the stick of the cane, Ocean swept it out of his hands, leaving him genuinely afraid that she was gonna kill him with it.

Viv smirked. “We’re gonna meet up later for the final fight. Now, let Darb go.” Rulio chuckled. “I can do many things…but I can’t do that.” Ocean held the cane up to his heart. “LET. HIM. GO.”

Rulio’s eyes widened. “Okay! Alright! Just give me the cane and I will let him free!” He snatched the cane and smashed it against the glass of the tube. “Come on. You’re free to escape now.” All of a sudden, his assistant yelled, “SCHERER! THERE’S A FIRE OVER BY THE EMERGENCY EXIT!”

Wen and Frank, who were standing on the ground a floor above the fire, were bickering at each other. Wen facepalmed himself. “What did you think would happen, messing with the tube controls?” Frank shrugged. “Darb would be let out?”

Rulio sighed. “No wonder this laboratory was cheap to rent.” Jayman pushed himself forward. “Ooh, that’s one nasty fire. It’s spreading everywhere. This entire building’s going to burn down!”

Rulio crossed his arms. “I didn’t notice THAT HUGE FIRE RIGHT IN FRONT OF MY EYES! They really do seem to be planning to burn the auburn…”

Wen yelled, “EVERYONE, LISTEN! THIS WAS NOT DELIBERATE AND WE KNOW A WAY TO FIX IT!”

Viv yelled back, “How?!”

Frank pointed to something below him. “Right behind this orange mess is a fire extinguisher! Someone is going to have to tread through, avoiding the flames, and then they will grab it and put the fire out!”

Jayman ran his hand through his hair. “What if we can’t avoid the fire?”

Frank slightly smiled. “Then you took a great risk for the others. But, you would be lying on the ground, diverting the fires to yourself. The others can go around your body and put out the fire.”

Jayman turned around to face us. “Alright. Who wants to try to do it? Ocean and I aren’t going because we have the rest of the day planned in our minds. But who else is willing to take the risk?”

Everyone stayed silent for a few seconds, so I slowly walked in front of the others, facing Jayman. “I’ll do it.”

Everyone gasped. Jayman put a hand on my shoulder. “Are you sure? This is a big risk here. You could possibly die out there.” I nodded. “I know.”

He stared at me. “If you somehow manage to make it out alive, I will give you all of the Dr. Pepper in the world.” I chuckled. “What was that supposed to be? A pickup line? That’s pretty lazy, Jay Man.”

I took one last look at the others. “Alright, guys. Wish me luck!” And so, I went off.

I slowly walked into the fire. Flames encompassed the entire perimeter. My vision was getting more and more blurry, but kudos to Frank’s hand, I was able to make out the fire extinguisher in front of me.

I looked down. If I went in a very specific direction, I would be able to grab it. Cool, I thought. Maybe I’ll be able to actually survive.

I treaded my feet in the perfect way. Until my left foot almost slipped and caught fire.

The fire initially burned my shoe, which I thought would be fine and that I could buy another one tomorrow. But no. The small flame spread all over my body, and there was no way to stop the burning.

I collapsed to the ground. Everything went dark.

I woke up inside a hospital room. Tubes were hooked up to me, and my vision was still really bad. After a few more blinks, I was able to make out a few more figures. Jayman, Viv, Ocean, Wen, Frank, and Nelia all came into view.

The three Junkets were sitting in chairs, watching me, while my three original friends were standing in front of my bed.

The doctor next to me looked at a screen. “His heartburn is very major, but the beat of it is still strong.” His name tag read Dr. Pepperboy. What a name *that* was.
I looked down at my body. The fire had affected me really badly. I was scarred, and burn marks covered my entire skin.
Pepperboy’s eyes were glued to the screen. “Oh, hey. You’re back awake. We thought you were gonna be stuck in a coma forever. You’ve only been laying here for three hours. Your friends wanted to come visit.”
The others nervously waved at me. Pepperboy set the screen down and crossed his arms. “You’ve got three more minutes of visiting Darb. If you have anything else you want to say, say it now, please.”
Wen slightly smiled. “You’re cool. I like how you run things.” Frank shrugged. “I mean, yeah. Wen pretty much summed it up.” Nelia nodded. “You’ve got a good style.”
Ocean went next. “You’re a good friend.” Viv smiled. “I’m really glad you noticed us first inside that small town.” And finally, Jayman.
“Well, Darb. You were right. We have come a long way. If you survive, then you can prank me all you want. I won’t get bored. And if you don’t, then that house will be empty for another 137 years. Either way, I’ve got one thing I would love to say: Long live the Snarkies.”
I forged a smile. “I…thought…you…hated…that…name…” Jayman scoffed. “Absolutely not! That will always have a special place in my heart, Darb.”
I slowly pointed at my hat. “Here…take…this…” Jayman scrunched his eyebrows. “What? But this thing is so important to you.” I nodded.
“I…want…you…to…have…it…remember…me…by.”
He widened his eyes a little bit. “Oh. Well, then I will gladly keep it.” Pepperboy clapped his hands. “Alright, time’s up. I hope you enjoyed your visit.”
I continued to lay down, and Pepperboy was constantly checking his screen. At one point, he became really frantic. “Shoot. Shoot! This is not good. This is *not* good. I need to call my nurse.”
The nurse ran inside the room. “What do you need me for?” Pepperboy pointed at the screen. “Look at this for every second you possibly have. I will check on his heartbeat.” He held the stethoscope up to me.
He was panting with worry. “Okay…your heart rate seems to be normal…crap. It’s slowing by a huge amount. Nurse, any updates on the screen?”

Her usual smile faded away. “His heartbeat is going off track. We’re losing him. WE’RE LOSING HIM!”

I saw Pepperboy hold that stethoscope against my heart even harder than before. At one point, his face went from panicked to calm but still scared. “It…stopped. At least that’s what I felt.” The nurse slowly nodded. “The screen confirms.”

The last thing I saw was the hospital room ceiling.

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Thirteen - Rulio

I was overhearing Jayman and the others inside Darb's hospital room. When their visit was done, they walked out of the room. A few minutes later, a guy named Dr. Pepperboy stepped out.

His expression was glum. Pepperboy took a breath and said to Jayman, "He's gone."

Jayman scrunched his eyebrows. "What?! But he promised he would stay alive…"

Pepperboy folded his hands together over his waist. "Look. The screens and the stethoscope say it all. Darb got burnt up horribly, and that caused him to pass away. I'm sorry, but there's nothing we can do now."

Jayman and the others started crying. Creste walked up to me. "Scherer, what are you doing?" My stern expression remained plastered on my face. "We're leaving this building. Come on. We're gonna wait for them to come to us."

We went into our disguises and walked back to my shack. I sat on my bed. That Darb guy was dead. I remember that right after he fell in the fire, all of the flames came to him. I was able to get the fire extinguisher and put it out.

No one even thanked me for what I did. They just ran over to Darb. He didn't even save you when you needed saving. That honor belongs to me, doesn't it?

I stared at the wall. Creste gave me a hash brown for my dinner. I ate it within 30 seconds. I heard footsteps in the grass outside.

I set my ear to the door. It was 100% Jayman and the others. They ran to my backyard and said loudly, "Alright! Time to get set up for the fight!"

It was very sudden for me. I didn't think they would actually commit to this right after their best friend died. I thought they would wait at least a day. It's not like two seconds after someone extremely important to you died, you just immediately get ready to battle someone. What sort of logic is that?

I went outside and climbed on the roof of the shack. They didn't notice me, but I was watching them talk to each other. They were truly best friends, because I have never seen a group of people trust each other like that.

I stared for a few minutes, and I heard someone else's feet on the roof. I turned around, and Creste knelt down next to me. "Scherer, what are you doing?"

I paused for a moment, and then replied, "I don't know." She crossed her arms. "Looking at you, it looks like you're searching for something."

I sighed. "I'm jealous, okay? Watching Jayman and the others having the best friendship ever makes me envious knowing that he used to be friends with me. And then he just

went and betrayed me for that guy named Darb, who didn't even save them from the fire! I was the one who ended up getting the extinguisher."
Creste put a hand on my shoulder. "I'll be your best friend that will never betray you." I held onto my arm. We stood together for a second, and then I put my hands on my hips. "I'm gonna go down there."
All of a sudden, Creste pulled me in for a hug. "You got this. I trust you." I nodded. "Thank you, Lackey."
I jumped down from the roof of the shack and landed on my feet. Creste threw the cane down, which I snatched with my right hand. "Well, well, well. If it isn't Jayman and his friends. Before you start killing me, I have something to say."
Jayman raised an eyebrow. "Oh, really? What is it you've gotta spill?" I cleared my throat.
"Jayman, who saved you from the fire? Who ran through the flames, grabbed the extinguisher, and put the fire out? Me. Who was your friend from the very beginning? Not Darb, whom you've known for a month. I have been your friend since the start of kindergarten. And this is how you repay me? I was genuinely willing to let you be safe while I was killing the ones I hated. Then I heard some news that you were plotting to kill me? What have I done to you? I was going to let you live and just have the others killed, and then out of the blue, you want to kill your best friend? With these random guys you have met for a month? I heard the news that you thought something was wrong with me. And you know what? Maybe that's true. Maybe I'm a monster that wanted to hurt Kurt for hurting me. That's something called getting what you deserve. Have you ever heard of the phrase 'eye for an eye'? I was trying to follow that rule! And then you went away and claimed I was insane for no reason. Is it because I have auburn eyes? And there's that hideous rumor about me? Be honest: When I ran through the fire, did you want it to burn the auburn? Of course you did! You're siding with the Junkets! The people who destroyed me and broke me into pieces! Jayman, this is why I want to end you and all of your other friends."
Jayman glared. "If you think that will make me reconsider, then your brain is deep fried. You were once a sweet guy, and the killing caught me off guard, okay?"
I laced my fingers around the stick of the cane. "If that's what you think of me, then I say it's high time we start this fight."
I walked over to the three Junkets. The brunette one looked at me with worry. I stabbed his arm with the beak.
The ginger one, who was originally sitting next to the brunette one, got up from his seat and tried to run away. I grabbed his stomach with the cane and poked his leg.

The girl with blonde hair had already ran, but I could still see her hiding behind the trees. I threw the cane at her leg, and it hit.
The other three lunged on top of me and held me down. Jayman took the cane and aims it at my throat. I scrunched my eyebrows. “Wow, already? I thought we could have some more build up beforehand.”
All of a sudden, the cane dropped out of his hand and Jayman plopped down on top of me. Creste had kicked him down. “I thought you could use some help.”
I stood up, exasperated. “Nice! Now go fight off the Junkets over there.” I pointed to where they were.
I turned around and faced Viv and Ocean. I held up my cane. “Oh, you’re going to get it!”
All of a sudden, Jayman got up and kicked me down.
I got up and put the stick of the cane against his chest, throwing him down. Jayman punched me in the nose, giving it a nosebleed. I put my foot on his stomach, but he kicked me in the behind since his feet were there.
Creste dragged Jayman away. “I’ll take care of him for you.” The three Junkets ran at me.
I fended the brunette down using the cane. The ginger climbed on my back, which I quickly tackled off. The blonde pumped up her fists, so I stabbed her knuckles with the cane’s beak. The ginger tried to stand up, but I kicked him back down before he could say a word.
Viv punched me in the chest, which didn’t affect me one bit. I stabbed her in the arm with my cane. Ocean tried to do something that bewildered me, but I gave her a little poke in the arm before anything else could happen.
I felt a punch to my back, and I fell to the ground, unconscious. A scene played in my head.

Jayman and I were at Windvale Park. We were both 8 years old. His parents were out of town that weekend so they could see The Beatles at a concert a few hundred miles away. Jayman invited me to the park, so I grabbed my sunglasses. I told my parents about the playdate. When they approved, my excitement was immeasurable.
I met up with him. He was smiling his face off. “Hi, Rulio! Do you want to play tag?” I pressed my fingers together. “Actually, I was thinking we could do something tamer so that my sunglasses don’t fall off.”
Jayman agreed that we would do something else. I noticed a couple of kids running around a grove of cherry trees.

I pointed to the trees. “Jayman! We should go climb up one of those!” He nodded. “Great idea!

So, we went over to the biggest cherry tree. Jayman smiled. “I’ll go first so I can give it a test run for you!” He gripped as hard as he could, and he was able to make it up to the branch.

He stared down at me and gave me a big nod. “It’s so fun! Come up, Rulio!” I shrugged. “Okay…sure.”

I grabbed hold of a ledge in the tree. It was kind of like rock climbing but made out of bark. I took slow steps up. The branch was still far away, so I sped it up a little bit.

I held onto the branch and hoisted myself up and sat on it. Jayman smiled. “It’s great, isn’t it? Look at the view of Windvale!” I nodded. “Yeah. It’s cool.”

He pulled off a small cherry from the leaves. “Do you think these are poisonous?” I burst out laughing. “Jayman! They’re for birds, not humans!” His eyes widened. “Oh, yeah!”

We sat there for a few more minutes. I cleared my throat. “I’m going to climb down now.” Jayman scrunched his eyebrows. “Rulio, this is the biggest branch on the tree. Are you sure it’s safe?” I scoffed. “I’ll be fine!”

I tried to reach the ledges, but my weight was too large for it to stay, so the branch collapsed. I fell to the ground on my back.

I rubbed my eyes, blinked, and looked up. Jayman was holding on to the top of the tree for dear life. “RULIO! IT’S GOING TO FALLLLLLLL!”

The entire tree collapsed onto me along with Jayman. I screamed, and it went right onto me.

I woke up from the tree incident. I managed to scramble out of the cherry tree mess. I looked at myself in the mirror for any injuries. I had a giant gash on my neck from one of the smaller branches.

I went back home and dabbed the gash with a napkin. My dad noticed, and he scrunched his eyebrows. “Rulio, how in Windvale did you get that neck injury?!”

I sighed. “Dad, I tripped and fell on the sidewalk.” Dad shook his head. “No. No one gets a gash that big from a concrete injury. What *really* happened?”

I pressed my fingers together. “I…went to Windvale Park with Jayman. We wanted to climb up a cherry tree. We successfully sat on the big branch for a few minutes, and then I wanted to get off. The branch snapped off, and then the tree fell down on me. I’m sorry, Dad.”

He glared at me. “You should know better than to get into mischief like that.” My lip quivered. “I just wanted to climb up a tree…” Dad put his hands onto his hips. “Well, you got a scar on your neck from it. Every time you hang out with that Jayman kid, there’s

always some wrong choices. Apologize to him right now, and then come back here. I can't believe you, Rulio."
I went over to Jayman's house. He had broken his arm, which was in a sling. I sighed. "Jayman, I'm really sorry for that tree incident."
He smiled. "It's okay, dude. I forgive you. It wasn't your fault. It was the tree's." I nodded. "Thank you."
My parents had beat me up that night.

My eyes snapped back open. Creste was looking at me. She sighed with relief. "We thought you were dead for a second!"
Jayman still had a stern expression on his face. He had forgiven me when I gave him a brutal injury, and now he wants to kill me for doing absolutely nothing to him?! I had really thought we were going to be best friends…forever.
The others tried to hurt me, but I just put them back down with my cane. I sighed. "Jayman, please. I don't want to actually do this."
He scrunched his eyebrows. "What do you mean? Just a second ago, you were ruthless! What happened during your little blackout?"
I put my hands on my cane. "Do you remember the cherry tree incident when we were eight years old?" Jayman scoffed. "Oh, that? Yeah, why?" My lip quivered. "You forgave me when I gave you a serious injury. And now you're angry even when I didn't lay a finger on you?"
He glared. "You weren't a killer back then! Also, that was an accident! Now you're a merciless brute who wants to kill everyone he sees!"
I picked up my cane. "You shouldn't be saying nothing. But if it's a proper fight that you want, then come and get it!"
The others all dashed at me. They were like my parents that night: Cruel, merciless, constantly beating me up, telling me that I don't belong.
I remember that on that day, they kicked me out of the house because I had done something bad by accidentally hurting Jayman. I also remember what they said to me that night:
"We hate your eyes! Your filthy, rotten auburn eyes! We hate your hair, your cheekbones, your torso, WE HATE EVERYTHING ABOUT YOU!"
I don't know where they are now, but if they saw that Wanted sign, an evil grin probably spread across their faces. They would be proud of Jayman now.

I held the cane in their faces. Creste was behind me, fighting off the Junkets. My lip quivered.“ENOUGH! Please. I understand that I am a very bad man with malicious intentions. I get that no one likes my eyes or anything else about me! But can we please end this now? Jayman, I used to trust you more than anybody else. What happened to that?”
Jayman’s brows went down. “Everything happened to that.” He pounced on me, grabbed the stick of my cane, and held the beak up to my neck scar. It was like what my parents had done. They had held a steak knife up to my gash and just made it deeper. Well, that was *not* going to happen again.
I kicked him off of me. I was panting with rage. “Stop this. *RIGHT NOW.”* All of a sudden, someone kicked my cane down. I turned around. It was Ocean.
She grabbed me by the arms and bashed my chin against a rock. I screamed with pain. Ocean pushed me against the ground, took the raven’s head, and pushed the beak right into my torso.
The others all stood there, amazed that Ocean, of all people, was the one to defeat me.
My eyes filled up with tears. “Shoot. Lackey’s going to be so sad…”
Creste pushed down the Junkets and noticed me on the ground, body turned over. She was already crying. “No…NOOOO!”
Creste ran over to me and turned my body over. Just like what happened when I first found her in the snow. She was yelling at the top of her lungs.
“Scherer?! Scherer, now is *not* the time to die. Your eyes are beautiful! Auburn is the best color! Please don’t go. We still have a future! RULIO, I LOVE-”

You too, Creste.

I would say it out loud, but my eyes had already lost the light in them.

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fourteen - Jayman

"RULIO, I LOVE YOU!" The person nicknamed Lackey screamed.
I crossed my arms. "Rulio is dead. Now go get your suitcases and *leave."* She grabbed his cane and slowly left the backyard, still crying.
I looked over and saw a whole bunch of people that were watching. The leftover Junkets, the staff at Granny Urchin's, the shop employees, and even the people from the face paint shop were all cheering.
I smiled with pride. It felt good knowing that there are people who appreciate you. Mayor Davis squirmed forward.
He crossed his arms. "So…you missed all of your jobs at Granny Urchin's Pub n' Club, pretended to be the lead singer of a band named Trosh, sided with the Junkets, and more just so you could kill this guy?"
I nodded. "Yep. We have been plotting this since the very beginning." Mayor Davis nodded. "We'll give you the 500 dollars. But I'm rather curious: What are you going to use it for?"
I crossed my arms. "I'm going to upgrade Granny Urchin's to make it a much better diner. And I'm going to pay for the burial of Darb Roberts." Mayor Davis scrunched his eyebrows. "Who is he?"
I smiled slightly. "The real leader of this. I was just his right hand man. He died in a fire, and he was my best friend." Mayor Davis smiled. "I'm sure he was a great guy." I nodded. "Yeah. He was."
Mayor Davis raised my arm up. "Everyone give it up for Jayman Hampton!" The people all clapped their hands. My eyes filled up with tears watching them give me a round of applause. I never thought that would happen in my life.
The mayor gave orders to Jacque and Chef Robin. They walked over and picked up Rulio's body. Lackey said to herself, "They're taking him away…"
Not only did I improve Granny Urchin's, but I improved all of Windvale, too. Since it was extremely cheap, I was able to transform the poor, slummy town into a nice, rich one! The population went up by at least 1,000.
A few days later, I walked up to Viv's house. I rang her doorbell. She opened the door. "Yes, Jayman?" I smiled slightly. "To answer your question, I like you, too."
She blushed and pressed her fingers together. "Can I…?" I nodded. "Sure." Viv quickly kissed me.
A week later, Darb's funeral was going to happen. Viv, Ocean, and I all drove there in his shiny red convertible. It felt weird without Darb's chaos in there. It didn't feel right.

We went to the funeral home. Father Timothy, the priest, was waiting. “Hello. Are you attending Darb Roberts’ funeral?” We all nodded in unison. He nodded. “Great. Come inside. It will begin in just a few minutes.”

A bunch of other people were in the building. Most of them were Darb’s family. I saw his dad, also known as Maestro Roberts. He looked very worn out. Darb’s mother was sitting next to him. Darb’s six other siblings were all next to each other behind the parents.

A few of Darb’s childhood friends were also there. He knew a lot more people than I thought he did. Father Timothy walked up to the podium. I noticed Darb’s casket behind him.

The priest cleared his throat.

“Hello. As you know, we are all here today to remember the passing of Darb Pernill Roberts. He passed away on Tuesday, February 9th, 1971 at 7:28 PM. He was 21 years old, and he would’ve turned 22 on August 4th. Now is our first story, told by Wally Roberts. Will you please come up, Wally?”

Darb’s father walked up to the podium.

“Hello. I’m Wally Roberts, Darb’s father. I used to be the famous Maestro Roberts, which had a major downfall 12 years ago, so I had to retire from that position. I still remember how the crowd loved watching me as a ringleader. I always asked my family if they wanted to watch me. No one wanted to. Except for Darb. I remember he always loved me performing as Maestro Roberts. After I stepped down, he even became Maestro Roberts for a year or two. He was so inspired by me. None of my other children were. He said himself he still believed in me, even after the tomatoes were thrown and I had a huge breakdown. I hope Darb knows that his father, Wally, still loves him greatly.”

He walked off of the stage. Father Timothy looked at the list. “The second story is from Quinn Olivandro. Quinn, will you please come up?”

Quinn was one of the childhood friends. She talked into the microphone on the podium.

“Hi. I’m Quinn Olivandro, Darb’s childhood friend. We went to school together. He was part of a friend group that was led by me. I remember whenever someone in our group got hurt at recess, he would always react and tell the teacher. Our group was inseparable. When we found out he had run away from home, we were truly and utterly devastated. I remember there was one bully named Greg, and he enjoyed making fun of me. Darb always stood up to Greg, which made him quit bullying. I hope Darb knows that his first friend group hasn’t forgotten him and we still love him.”

She walked off of the stage. Father Timothy clasped his hands together. “The third and final story is from Jayman Hampton. Jayman, will you please come up?”

I walked up to the podium and cleared my throat.

"Guess what? I knew Darb for a whopping two months. But that did not stop him from making an impact on my life and even becoming my best friend. I met him at Granny Urchin's Pub n' Club, Windvale's main diner. He was just a regular customer at first, but then he moved into the house next to me. You see, I like my alone time, so when he moved in, you could tell I was annoyed whenever he sent me letters pranking me. It went on like that for 3 weeks. My former friend, Rulio Scherer, was on a Wanted sign and the reward was 500 dollars. Well, Darb really wanted that money, so he convinced me to join his squad that he loved to call The Snarkies. And, so, with our combined effort, we ended up defeating Rulio. And he took the sacrifice for us. Long live the Snarkies."

I walked off of the stage. Father Timothy nodded. "Thank you to whoever told the stories. While Darb is not with us anymore, he will always be in our hearts. Now it's time to bury him at Windvale Cemetery."

We all drove to the cemetery. Wally and his oldest son, Hugh, were carrying the casket. They slowly put it in the dirt. Hugh covered the body. Wally planted a gravestone saying:

HERE LIES DARB ROBERTS
1949–1971

I noticed Lackey sitting in front of Rulio's grave, crying. Darb's family and childhood friends all left. I told Viv and Ocean to wait by the car.

I walked over to Lackey. She sniffed. "Go away, you killer." I knelt down beside him. "You really loved him, huh?" Lackey nodded. "Yes. Now please leave me in peace."

I sighed. "I'm terribly sorry. If I had known there was someone out there that truly loved him, I would've let him go." She swallowed. "I should've told him earlier, not when he had died, but I was too scared."

I nodded. "I know how it feels. Trying to tell someone you love them but your fear gets in the way." Lackey looked over at me. "And how exactly would you know? Did they end up dying right in front of you?"

I shook my head. "No. A while ago, I had a large crush on someone. I kept wanting to tell them how I felt, but I ended up rambling about a bunch of nonsense. When I finally did tell them, they ended up rejecting me. I was heartbroken. But now I found someone who loves me just as much as I love them, and now we're officially endgame."

She sighed. "I don't want to fall in love with anyone else. I just wanted *him*." I felt like crying for some reason. "I deeply apologize. And I mean it. If I had known you loved him, I would've told Ocean to stop. Do you…forgive me?"

Lackey shrugged. “I don’t forgive *anyone* for Rulio’s death, but I do forgive you for not knowing I loved him.”
I smiled slightly. “Do you…want a hug?” She nodded. “Sure.” I gave her a slight hug. Lackey smiled slightly. “Sorry about Darb, by the way.” I nodded. “I’m sure he’s proud of you right now. So is Rulio.”
I got up and went back to the car. “Alright. To remember Darb by, let’s give him the future he would’ve wanted.”

Epilogue

Epilogue (As told by Ocean)

2 years later. . .

It’s been 2 years since we killed Rulio. And that memory still sticks out in my brain today.
Jayman gave me a job at Granny Urchin’s, which took a little bit since there were a *lot* of people wanting to work there after Rulio’s death.
Viv and Jayman married last year. They got a new house that is much bigger than Jayman’s old house.
I moved into the house next to them, which was also high class.
We even lived on an official street! According to Jayman, the tiny neighborhoods didn’t have street names 2 years ago. Our street was “Roberts Avenue”. You can guess what that was named after. (Jayman requested it himself.)
I also became a professional scientist at Windvale Labs. I discovered that all the time Windvale has been a town, there was a family of elephants living underneath the ground! We moved them to their own house that gets lots of visitors.
I was only a scientist on the weekends. On the regular week days, I was a server at Granny Urchin’s. Mrs. Wallas signed an actual band named Trosh that became the official band of Granny Urchin’s. They performed every Friday night at 8 PM, which made the diner busy, which was good money.
One day, I was working at Granny Urchin’s, and Jayman and Viv came inside. They told me they had news. I asked what it was. They said that Wally Roberts had another kid, and they wanted Jayman to have him.
After I served them at the diner, we all went to their house. The kid was a baby. A very cute one, too. He had a few curls of dirty blonde hair and brown eyes. He was a spitting image of Darb.
Viv smiled. “He’s amazing! Jayman, what should we name him?”

He thought for a second. “Well, I was thinking that he looks a whole lot like Darb. And Darb made a huge impact on us, so I was thinking of a name that will always remind us of him.” Viv suggested Dr. Pepper as a joke. Jayman shook his head while smiling. “Let’s name him Darbus.” She nodded in agreement.

So, they lived together and raised Darbus. Once he was a toddler, he inherited Darb’s hat. It’s safe to say that Darb was very proud.

Creste Lackey, that one girl who loved Rulio, ended up living in his shack. She never left the house. She actually became decent friends with Jayman, inviting him over every so often. I would consider it a happy ending, but it would’ve only applied if Darb was still here for us and if Rulio was still here for Creste.

So, is it happy? Yes. Everyone seems to be in a good mood except for Creste. But is it sad? Very.

If you want to know how this story is supposed to be, then think to yourself.

Is it happy or sad?

About the Author + Acknowledgements

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rodger “Rodge” Miller is a brand new teen author. This is his first major novel! He really likes sushi, Disney World *and* Universal Studios, books, and theater! His lifelong dream is to write a book that turns into a movie. (We need to make this book popular, guys!) His favorite book series is the Percy Jackson universe by Rick Riordan. (His favorite character is Nico di Angelo.) He hopes you have a great day!
Fun fact #1: His favorite Twisted Tale of Windvale character is Darb!
Fun fact #2: He canonically likes Crulio more than Jayviv.
Fun fact #3: Rodge is bisexual!

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I'm going to make this quick and easy since everyone skips this part. I would like to thank:

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